

READING RIVERFRONT REVIVAL

**A Report and Recommendations from
The Waterfront Center
Washington, D.C.**

Summary of Reading Area Citizen's Planning Workshop

Reading Area Community College (RACC)

10 South Second Street.

May 2-3, 2003

Reading, Penn

Introduction

A planning workshop involving approximately 80 citizens was held on May 2 and 3, 2003, sponsored by the Wyomissing Foundation, Inc., Wyomissing, Penn., in consultation with the Riverfront Advisory Group. Its purpose was to produce a community consensus about what the future of the downtown riverfront in both Reading and West Reading should be. The workshop was conducted by the Waterfront Center, a non-profit educational corporation based in Washington, D.C. The citizen's workshop was preceded by a two-day reconnaissance on Oct. 21 and 22, 2002, by the Center's co-directors, which concluded with a presentation and oral report at the Yocum Library of Reading Area Community College (RACC).

Organizational support for the workshop was supplied by the Wyomissing Foundation, RACC and the Berks County Planning Commission.

Serving as facilitators for the workshop were:

- Ann Breen, co-director, The Waterfront Center;
- John Sherwood, president, the Sherwood Consultancy, Inc.,

Annapolis, Md.

- Charles Norris, principal, Norris and Norris Architects and Urban Designers, Cambridge, Mass.

The basic idea of the workshop was to bring together a representative group of citizens, assisted by outside facilitators, to develop their own concept plan for the Reading area on both sides of the Schuylkill River, focusing on the area between the Bingaman Street Bridge on the south and the Schuylkill Avenue Bridge on the north but also including consideration of area creeks and former canals.

The workshop recommendations are the beginning point. Follow-up -- in both the organizational sense and in more detailed plans -- is needed, building on the consensus established over the day-and-a-half-long work sessions.

The philosophy of the Waterfront Center is that the best city planners for a city are its users. That is, the business, civic, governmental and neighborhood leaders in any city will know instinctively what will work best. In the words of author Roberta Brandes Gratz, writing in *The Living City* (Simon & Schuster, 1989):

"The vision for a place should come from the community up, not from City Hall down...Genuine participatory planning, in which public input is desired, not just tolerated, is rare. Public meetings are many; acceptance of the public's preference is rare."

When basic community knowledge and appreciation is joined with outside expertise familiar with economic development techniques, urban design, and waterfront planning principles, a powerful combination is established to forge creative, do-able plans. And so it is the case here.

The recommendations summarized here represent a good deal of give and take and a considerable amount of discussion. The workshop was preceded on Thursday afternoon by a bus and walking tour of key sites along the Schuylkill River. A representative group of workshop participants was able to take part in the tour, ably planned and guided by Rick McDougal, marketing director of Burkey Construction Co. with assistance by Fritz Rothermell.

The workshop itself began with a specially-tailored illustrated show of sample riverfront developments around the country and world presented by Center co-director Breen. David Thun, vice president of the Wyomissing Foundation, opened the workshop.

This report consists of six parts. First is a bit of background on the structure of the workshop. Second is a summary of the Topical Work Group discussions and recommendations conducted Friday morning, May 2. Third is a summary of the Design Group recommendations developed during sessions on Friday afternoon and Saturday morning, May 3, and summarized by participants at the closing. Part Four contains the analysis and recommendations of The Waterfront Center Team. Fifth is a consensus site plan prepared by Mr. Norris for the Center, combining the recommendations developed by three separate design teams. The sixth part is list of Resources that may provide useful information and references to the community as it proceeds with riverfront revival work. Along

with this document are returned to the Wyomissing Foundation all of the worksheets and sketch maps created during the workshop.

Organization of the Workshop

To understand this report, it is necessary to know how the workshop was structured.

Participants were invited with an eye to reflecting the diverse interests of the community. In three morning "brain-storming" sessions, participants were divided into topical, or subject area, groups. The assignment was to develop broad goals and priorities within the topic areas to recommend to the workshop as a whole, without site-specific references. Participants were told to think imaginatively and boldly and not to be concerned about costs and organizational responsibilities.

The topical groups were as follows:

- Economic Development Opportunities/Tourism-- led by John Sherwood.
- Urban Design Principles/Historic Preservation -- led by Charles Norris.
- The Public Realm, Open Space and Recreation -- led by Ann Breen.

Following summary presentations of the conclusions and recommendations of each of the topical work groups, reported by citizens, participants were re-divided into three design teams (coded red, orange and green) consisting of members drawn from each of the topical sessions, thus insuring a good mix of the brainstorming discussions in the concept planning work. During the design group discussions, site-specific recommendations were developed, and considerations of practicality, cost and organization were taken up.

At the conclusion of the design group sessions, with each group working on the same site plan, summaries of each independent design group's concept plan were presented in public, again by citizen participants. Important for the community is to notice the recommendations in common developed by separate groups, working with different facilitators who have diverse professional backgrounds and styles. These findings are the core of the developing consensus for what should happen along the Reading area riverfront.

Summaries of Topical Work Groups

- **Economic Development.** Presented by John Dever.

The group established as an objective for the riverfront the addition of housing, both affordable and market-rate, something that was felt could be developed in the near-term. The riverfront should be enhanced in a way that would encourage this.

Another overall objective established by the group was the aim of retaining the area's young population, to stop the exodus being experienced. One way to help this is to get the area's schools involved, to establish an education center that would focus on the river, its natural and cultural aspects, and the downtown history. The idea here is to use the river as an educational tool and to get young people involved.

The group wants to see the present river trails connected, building on the system already in place.

Another recommendation used the phrase "natural legs," by which the group meant developments should be organic, growing out of the region naturally, reflecting market forces and the community's desires. The opposite would be a development copied from somewhere else and plopped into the Reading area.

Entertainment and sports were two areas identified which should be further developed and which would have economic impacts. Making the riverfront a year-round destination was discussed by the group, looking at such uses as offices and restaurants.

Facilities for children should be included in riverfront plans, such as imaginative playgrounds. This would give the enhanced riverfront a family orientation.

Beautification and landscaping of the riverfront was another recommendation, and the establishment of gardens, all of which would support economic development.

The downtowns of Reading and West Reading want to be tied together, to add to each and to serve to break down the boundary that the river and the separate political jurisdictions present.

The group recommended that the river be redeveloped by segments, to tackle one portion at time as opposed to trying to do everything at once, all according to a carefully worked out plan.

The group would like to tie the river to the mountain, linking the area's two principal natural features, perhaps with a trail link.

Increased accessibility to the river was a major need, the group felt. Included as part of this objective are the provision of places where it would be possible for people to touch the river. The desire to have fun events at the riverside was brought up, such as rafting races and other water sports plus roller blading . Mention was made of the success enjoyed in the past at Scenic River Days. Parking will have to be provided.

The visibility of the river itself must be improved, as it is significantly hidden under current conditions. Both selective clearing of brush and lighting were recommended. The Schuylkill River should be visible to motorists on the bypass, the group stated.

Crime prevention was a priority, which the group felt would be advanced by good environmental design of riverfront facilities. In other words, if large numbers of people are attracted to the riverfront, criminal behavior is discouraged. Along this line, the group set as an objective the provision of year-round activities and facilities, so that people would use the river area in winter months and well as summer.

And finally, the group saw the river as a catalyst for the area's revival, as the potential genesis of a Reading Revival.

• **The Public Realm.** Presented by Susan Philips Speece and Lee Olsen.

The group began with **safety and comfort** which were felt to be very important objectives in the first stages of the riverfront revival. Under this heading the group made the following recommendations:

Improved lighting, park patrols, remote monitoring, clearing away underbrush to improve visibility, provision of telephone kiosks, police bike patrols, rest rooms, steady maintenance, adding water fountains, establishing a "center" with first aid equipment and extension of the trail system to allow looping from one side to the other and back, which will require the provision of more river crossings.

Improving the **image** of the riverfront was the next broad concern of the group. It felt the current reputation of the Schuylkill in the Reading areas was negative. Positive promotion about the river and a build-up of a sense of about what's to happen is desired.

The group wants the riverfront to be **family-oriented**. Year-round programming of events and attractions was seen as needed to draw in young people and their parents. The group saw the need for a marketing and publicity campaign about what's possible to do along the river and it wants to see an infectious feeling about the river spread through the community. As part of this effort, the results of the workshop and the resulting report and vision for the future should be taken into the community.

The river's **bridges** should be beautified to reinforce the connections on both sides.

Creating a **sense of the future** and instilling the idea that the riverfront is home to innovation was felt to be important. The design that is employed along the river will be critical. The group wanted to have both up-to-date techniques employed and for the architectural style to reflect the history of the area. It should be good enough to establish a permanent draw, to make people want to come back and to contribute to making the area a place where young people will want to remain.

Another broad area of emphasis for the group was to establish **connectedness** to the river and to improve its accessibility.

There's a need, the group stated, to make sure whatever is done on the river addresses the needs and interests of all segments of the community. It was felt that the area's diversity was not celebrated as it should be, and that there should be a sense of inclusiveness about the river.

There wants to be a "buy in" of the community as a whole to the riverfront revival, creating a sense of ownership. Cultural and religious events should be planned.

In the area of physical improvements to further the goals of making connections and improving access, the group wanted to see more pedestrian crossings, to make possible loops from side to side. The trails would be expanded from their present status, trolleys would be added and perhaps trains, as the railroad played a significant role in the area's history.

Gateways would be placed at entrances to announce arrival to the riverfront, and attention paid to providing vistas to the river to enhance its visual access. Overlooks are desired at key locations to further this objective.

Finally, the group wanted to install a sense of creativity and innovation at the riverfront. It also adopted as its motto the phrase: Do It All and Do It Well.

It listed what it meant by this: picnic areas; boating of various kinds; fishing areas and piers; at least one pedestrian bridge; exploring the feasibility of a floating dam; exercise areas; a place on the riverside for showing evening movies; fountains; performance venues; making the riverfront a 12-month destination; provision for ice skating; providing concerts and the like on evenings; programs geared to young people; provision for the arts; marketplaces; a train and a trolley; a well-designed children's playground and a children's park designed for those with special needs; keeping and enhancing bird habitats; setting up a welcome center kiosk; having a nature and history center that would place visitors on the trail system; adding interpretive elements along the trails; providing for parking; setting up interpretive displays; providing bike racks; adding a rock-climbing wall; building a roller rink; establishing a major focal point to give the river a sense of place; building overlooks; adding water features; providing quiet, intimate spaces; having food areas; places for games and play, and including a river boat.

The group wanted to create an infectious feeling about the river and towards that end came up with an original slogan:

"Schuylkill Area River Sensation" or SARS!"

• **Urban Design and Historic Preservation.** Presented Fred Gaige, Bill Vitale and John Weidenhammer.

The group organized its recommendations around three broad areas: Goals and Guidelines, Big Concepts and Discrete Projects, with some items receiving dual designations.

In the first-listed area were the following:

New elements along the river need to be compatible with their surroundings and uses in the physical sense; the river needs visibility, as in protecting view corridors and clearing away underbrush (also under Projects); accessibility for all businesses to and from the river (also a Big Concept); have small items with individuals' identities such as pavement bricks; establish links in the school system to the area's rich history, aiming at elementary and middle school ages; celebrate the area's diversity through all of the programs along the river and in a riverfront museum; orient future development toward the river, and re-orient present development so that they don't show their backsides to the river; provide safety and security for all visitors; develop a riverfront theme or themes which might involve the area's history as part of the Underground Railroad or its African-American heritage; encourage high-density developments along the river; revive

architectural excellence such as the Reading area enjoyed in the past and seek unique designs (such as in Columbus, Indiana); look at riverfront revitalization as a citywide redevelopment stimulus; seek a balance between keeping natural areas and man-made developments; see that provisions are made for children to have places on the river for them; set up a new coordinating entity for the river ("The Center for River Revitalization"); provide for food and entertainment venues along the river; establish cross-river connections; reconnect neighborhoods to the river (also a Big Concept); extend the riverfront into the city and the city to the river (again, also a Big Concept); provide opportunities for adventure and exploration along the river for children; make the riverfront inclusive, accessible to all elements within the community by making it a comfortable place, providing for a sense of ownership, having multiple attractions and having some affordable and/or free events and allowing for quiet, intimate spaces; provide for community and visitor-oriented places; pay attention to the aesthetics, desirably relating materials to the area's heritage and architecture; involve young people in development of the riverfront plan and resulting projects; visions such as the above and others generated at the workshop will need effective organization to implement, either non-profit or for-profit; expand housing along the river and build neighborhoods to the river (also a Project); remove the present industrial barriers to the river (also a Big Concept), and focus on the future through interpretation of the area's history.

Under the Big Concept heading, in addition to the items above were:

Seeing the river way as a transportation medium; plan for alternative futures for the community; look into recreating the canal and port basin that the Port of Reading once had, with boat houses, links with the area's railroad history with boat and rail trips, making this a potential focal point for the riverfront project and investigating if original structures lie buried; such a canal port could be the centerpiece for a museum with a heritage theme; find the right use(s) for the 40-acre Dana property (also a Project); instill Pennsylvania pride into the riverfront revival; establish 24-hour activities for both residents and visitors, as with a laser light show and fireworks; emphasize transportation and accessibility, and lastly, use the riverfront to bring the county together.

The group's list of projects beyond those cited above include these:

Establishing the "buy a brick" program to give residents a sense of ownership in the river; building a Monopoly game board along the river (it's in part how Reading got its name put on the proverbial map); build a "Philosopher's Landing" at a prime location, for boats, performances and presentations; make the

walking and bike paths continuous; establish a water taxi service, with train connections; establish a Riverfront Museum to feature area history, ethnic development and a timeline for Berks County; establish a riverfront market; provide for fishing sites, such as at South Sixth Street, Heritage Park, Bertholet Dock, at the confluence of the Schuylkill and Tulpehocken Creek etc.; build a River Heritage Trail featuring the following elements: rail history, recreation, religious heritage, canal and associated industry, boat-building, architecture, energy, early settlement (Lenape Indians), immigration and natural values, for examples; open up the river with selective clearance in the short-term; look into having a dam to control the river flow and level; build pedestrian bridges; establish an international urban textile center to build on area industrial heritage; get the area colleges to unite in contributing to the riverfront revival project; build, light and keep clean gateways to the cities; look to feature the combined history of the river and the cities through museum and educational programs; link the two downtowns and their riverfronts with pedestrian ties, a trolley and by car; establish a visitor information center on the river; encourage shops and retail ventures; erect a riverfront marketplace; have public facilities such as rest rooms; interpret the area's railroad heritage; establish a "boathouse row" on the river for area college crews; think about an "old city" style streetscape using cobblestones, a water wheel, gas lights etc.; have crafts workshops and sales; connect tours to other areas within the county; and finally, bring back the Scenic River Days festival.

Summary of Design Group Recommendations

- **Red Group.** John Sherwood facilitator. Presented by Lee Olsen, Warren Haggerty and Carol Adams.

The group began with considerations of what was needed in an organizational sense to enable a riverfront revival to occur. It recommended that a riverfront development organization be established that would function as an advocate for revitalization and that would promote implementation of developments and events. The choice was seen as between setting up an entirely new entity or establishing a component with an existing body.

Its first mission would be to prepare and adopt a plan for riverfront improvements. Pursuant to this, the riverfront organization would study zoning and other development controls to assure that new developments were consistent with the broad public interest in the river corridor.

The new riverfront entity would have the authority to acquire land and development rights to key parcels, with the basic aim of ensuring public access to the river and also to insure that the entity has sufficient muscle to intervene on behalf of the river and riverfront as regards nearby public or private developments.

The initial focus of the riverfront body, the group felt, should be between the Bingaman and Buttonwood Bridges, but should take in the entire workshop study area as it proceeds. The anchor point is clearly the Penn Bridge connecting Reading and West Reading.

To get riverfront revival going, the new entity should pick an early, visible action to signify that positive changes are coming.

In the development arena, the group recommended as an initial step the opening up of the views of the river. The group felt many of the trees now blocking a visual connection were not that valuable, and with clearance, would open things up for other developments to occur. The clearance would be done selectively and with an eye to protecting the habitat, meaning that a professionally prepared clearance program would be needed. This is an action that would be relatively inexpensive, would demonstrate a commitment to riverfront actions and would serve to create a "buzz" in the community as it would be a very visible action.

The next goal for the group was completion of the river trail system. Where use of riverfront land is not possible, structures such as a cantilevered

bridge to make the trail continuous would be needed. Where new development is planned, as on the Dana site, require that a riverfront trail is included. A study should be undertaken to identify the gaps.

An early objective for the trail system is to make possible a loop on both sides of the river in the vicinity of RACC. Another suggestion of the group is to use Schuylkill River Greenway Association property on the west side of the river for the trail and parking. A connection to the existing Thun Trail could be made after an overpass at Lancaster Ave. is built. The trail can then be extended south to Brentwood Industries. Working with the Pennsylvania highway department was recommended to complete the trail in the vicinity of the Penn Bridge. The pedestrian experience on this bridge needs to be improved, the group stated, perhaps with a limitation of walking to one side. The desire is to improve the connection from Reading to the commercial revitalization occurring in West Reading.

The group would like to develop themes along the riverfront trail, using durable, physical things that are attractive and interesting. To raise the comfort level of people on the trails, the group identified the need for a program that will assist the homeless who now use the riverfront and under-bridge areas.

The group called for recognizing in the planning that the Schuylkill River is a recreational asset itself. To make it usable as such, the river's edge has to be cleaned up, better access provided and additional parking developed. Fishing piers and boating ramps and docks will be needed to allow expanded recreational river use.

Improved visual access from adjacent areas and highways was recommended. The river's edge should be lit in the vicinity of the Penn Bridge, the group felt. Note was made of the desirability of improving the appearance of storm water outfalls into the river and that a study of this was imminent.

The group suggested taking a comprehensive look at the area's bridges including examination of possible new bridges. One possibility mentioned was a new facility leading to the Dana site, another a pedestrian link above the Buttonwood Bridge. Lighting the bridges was suggested as was upgrading the Penn Bridge.

Improvement to the "RACC Bridge" was called for, including raising the level of the deck and eliminating the cage on top.

Appropriately-scaled commercial development was suggested by the group, such as an ethnic market which the group felt should be an early action

item. The Dana site was mentioned as a one of two possible locations, where it would be part of a larger mixed-use development there that the group foresaw. Smaller commercial installations might be made at such sites as Canal Street, in the vicinity of the Orange Bar or in the park near the "RACC Bridge." Another suggestion was for a hotel in West Reading at the Penn View location. The group wants to encourage partnerships between commercial developers and RACC and other schools and colleges in the area.

Among public investments that the group wanted to see, mention was made of the need for children's playgrounds (including one area for children with special needs). An educational complex was suggested for the Dana site, which would have a career training component.

A recreation/sports complex was suggested, with the American Chain and Penske lot locations put forward as possibilities. Included would be a movie theater and music bandstand.

The group wants to extend River Road to the Schuylkill Ave. Bridge, possibly acquiring railroad right-of-way to permit vehicle use.

Housing development with sight lines to the river was suggested.

Another major thematic area for the group was preservation of both natural and cultural resources. Important historical artifacts should be retained, the group felt, either in place or housed in a museum. A heritage center should be established to support this objective and to provide services to visitors. It was recommended that the Wilson Safety Products buildings be saved for possible reuse. Railroad tracks should be retained to make possible future riverfront service. Interpretive devices should be installed to help explain the area's rich heritage. Longer term, the group called for restoration of the canal system or at least parts thereof and of the former canal basin.

While honoring its history, the Reading area should also recognize the current heritage being developed by newcomers.

The group wants to bring back Scenic River Days in a form appropriate for today and including environmental, educational and cultural elements. The event would need commercial support and would require a certain amount of infrastructure (such as providing utilities, restrooms and adequate security).

Smaller ethnic or neighborhood festivals should be encouraged also, the group felt, and a farmers' market developed (see above). Baer Park and Sixth and Canal Sts. were mentioned as festival sites.

Active recreational uses of the river as with kayak races, for example, want to be encouraged as a way to get people out enjoying the river. A series of youth activities are desired, promoted by the schools and conservation groups, involving fishing, boating and educational activities.

Overall, the group noted, having effective signs is important the entire riverfront revival effort. The Schuylkill River Greenway Association is studying this issue currently, it was noted.

In a special presentation that evolved from the group's deliberations, the importance of railroads to the area's history was noted and how it presented an opportunity to help develop community pride. Many railroad innovations were attributed to the Reading Railroad, which was at one time the largest employer.

The possibility of use the railroad as the theme for a park was suggested, as is the ability to use this heritage in various design elements in riverfront redevelopment, such as in a marketplace or in park employee uniforms. There would be the possibility of tracing the history of transportation in the area along the present and future river walkways, using cobblestones, bricks and ties as historic links.

One suggestion was for a "ghost" shape of a locomotive be placed at the river's edge, to graphically show the size without blocking views.

Another possibility held out is that one day rail service might be restored to the existing line along the river, which could be used for evening trips to the baseball park, originating at RACC, for example. Collateral themes that can be employed in the river revival work to come includes the labor movement, textiles, and coal, it was noted.

• **Orange Group**. Ann Breen facilitator. Presented by Fritz Rothermell, Scott Wales, Mary Beth Smilak and John Dever.

The group began its report by noting that there already was a good amount of development along the river and the job was to decide how to build on the existing assets.

A riverfront trail is now significantly in place, for instance. The trails need to be linked up and gaps filled in, such as where the railroad right of way is so close to the river where River Road ends that the trail is interrupted. Whatever its aesthetics, there is a pedestrian foot bridge over the river near RACC. There is Stonecliff Park as well as other public areas on the riverfront.

The Dana site and the American Chain and Cable location represent major development opportunities.

There are also trail sections on the western side and there is Schlegel Park there that was described as an underused asset. When a planned pedestrian connection is made over Lancaster Ave. more connections will be possible along the western riverfront.

Mention was made of the ongoing West Reading downtown streetscape improvement program, seen as developing Penn Ave. there into a community asset. Another asset to work with are the area's four river bridges.

At the confluence of the Schuylkill; and Tulpehocken Creek, the group recommended a mixed-use residential project. Below it, the group wants to add a pedestrian bridge as well as to provide fishing opportunities, which can appeal to young people. The rail line in this area provides an opportunity for a trolley or a train.

At the 40-acre Dana site, the group thought a mixed-use development would be best, coupled with an educational facility, perhaps serving as the location for a proposed new high school. There would be an opportunity to connect it with Centre Park and the Centre Park Historic District.

At the America Chain and Cable site, the group foresaw a welcome center, a technology center dedicated to futuristic research and a chance for a major piece of architecture.

For the Penn Bridge the group called for overlooks to be added, and for classic lampposts to be installed, and to make it a more symbolic entry point into both communities. The group felt the three central bridges should receive lighting treatment.

A "Philosopher's Landing" was endorsed for the RACC area, to serve as a public gathering and events space. A public art piece commemorating the treaty agreement between William Penn and the Lenape Indians was suggested. In this general area as well as on the west bank, the idea was put forward to have granite pieces installed which would serve as seating and which would withstand flooding easily. Trail access along and across the river would be maintained here.

For the former Eastern Machinery Co. site, the group proposed an ethnic marketplace plus shops, jazz clubs and movie theater. In other words, a major activity center appealing to multiple audiences.

The group wants to build a cantilevered structure to carry the trail along the river where it now has to return to an interior street as it makes its way down to Sixth Street. Here the group saw high-end residential lofts.

A pedestrian bridge at Heritage park would allow a loop to be made in the trail system.

The group took a look at what might be done in a 20-year time frame. It suggested an archeological study be made of the former canal system, with an eye to the possibility of reintroducing water and identifying boats that might be buried. For now, the canal areas should be protected through zoning to prevent the encroachment of developments that might preclude re-introducing water into canal segments later.

At the American Chain and Cable site is envisioned a Museum of the Future, perhaps with a water theme. Another long-term objective is to look into an inflatable dam possibility. Generally the group called for mixed-use type developments where industry once operated, and rezoning for same.

In the near-term, the group said it was important to involve the community, to get visibility for the riverfront effort and "to hit singles," by which it meant to get some things accomplished right away.

First is suggested a cleanup effort and a general opening up of the river. A landscaping professional should be consulted to prepare a plan for selective clearance and to make sure valuable species or plants needed for bank stabilization are not removed. The number two short-term objective of the group is to add to the trail system, to include activities along the system and to insure its integrity. Creating loops, adding parking and installing signs are some of the improvements mentioned.

The third area of emphasis is for the Riverfront Advisory Group (RAG) to mount an outreach effort to property owners, businesses and other

stakeholders. Liaison wants to be established with local governments, the county, the Berks Economic Partnership, and state and federal officials, among others.

Fourth, the group called for a marketing effort about the river and the planned enhancements. There want to be signs, a logo created, a name given the undertaking and a media effort.

Lastly, the group called for establishing a number of committees, under an overall steering group such as RAG. These would be public/private partnership committees that would perform various tasks while a steering committee would work on the strategic plan for the river, reaching out to community groups.

- **Green Group.** Charles Norris facilitator. Presented by Bill Vitale, Karl Graybill and Connie Leinbach.

Major themes for the Reading Riverfront Revival, as the group styled its findings, were as follows:

Making a "big splash" in year one, to get the entire project off to a strong start. Emphasizing connections such as with Reading and West Reading, but also between generations and among the different cultures in the community, using the river as a means of building bridges. The groups wants to see ethnic festivals, as means of celebrating the area's diversity. Fourth, the group saw the river as a catalyst for both cities, an asset that can stimulate developments through the them of building new bridges. Fifth, the group recommended expanding recreational uses of the river, mentioning such possibilities as a "tube-a-thon" as well as traditional boating and fishing activities. Still another of the bridges the group saw the river making possible is between natural values and commerce. Both can flourish along the river in supportive contrast with each other.

The group identified three principal project areas, namely the Dana site and Penn Bridge gateway with the area near the Orange Car identified as festival space, and the Canal St./Heritage Park setting.

Tying these together is to be an expanded walkway, which the group labeled a "greenway." For it the group recommended first of all, completing the missing links and creating continuous loops. It would add and enhance pedestrian crossings, make neighborhood connections to the greenway, have a promenade segment extending from Buttonwood Bridge south to Heritage Park, add interpretive signs about the area's history, include a fitness trail and children's play

areas (near neighborhoods), have band shells and performance spaces, outdoor rooms, fountains, fishing piers, a boating landing, a shared parking program, a Heritage/Visitors Center at the fire house and provide information about the canal system that was here.

A key portion of the promenade was seen between RACC and the Bingaman Bridge. Here the trail would be widened, outdoor "rooms" would be installed, added green space would be gained by placing Riverfront Drive on the other side of the Penske complex, the trail would be lit, signs would be installed throughout and at 2nd and Canal Sts. a streetscape enhancement would be undertaken, building crosswalks, adding landscaping as well as lighting.

Still in the public realm, other components the group recommended for consideration include pushcarts areas where food and crafts would be offered, centered in the promenade area, an amusement park with Ferris wheel, carousel and an arcade, a biking/skating and boat rental facility, and fish-cleaning station and bait shop. Still another suggestion is to light the area's bridges, namely the Penn Bridge, the RACC pedestrian crossing, the Bingaman and Schuylkill Ave. Bridges.

Finally, an arts and cultural market center was suggested for the Canal Street area, as well as additional housing and commercial activity.

A number of private development prospects were identified. Prominent among them is the idea that there is a market for housing along the river, some of which could be located in previously developed areas, other segments could develop near existing residential sections and still others would be new.

Restoring Reading as the "Outlet Capital of the World" was an objective the group suggested. Here the idea was that Reading, West Reading and Wyomissing should work together toward this goal.

A hotel near the river was suggested. An amusement park could be a private undertaking, with rides, rinks and other attractions that would generate revenues. An arcade would be a component, as would food venues. A number of commercial areas would be along the river, including one or more restaurants overlooking the river.

At the Dana site, where intense uses were foreseen, a new roadway should be built along the river's edge instead of through the middle of the site. In addition, there needs to be a new public road and sidewalk connections east/west across the site to connect the Northside neighborhood to the river. The existing

Northside School needs to have a playground/open space buffer on the east side shielding it from any new developments that take place. As to what uses should be planned here, the group suggested that a planning workshop dealing with the site and its vicinity be held.

Another suggestion of the group was to move Riverfront Drive away from the park along the river, allowing it to be expanded, with traffic placed on Second St. In another transportation issue, the group expressed concern that the state highway department was planning to fill in bridges on the western bank now carrying highways 222 and 422. This would, the group said, effectively ruin chances of developing anything along the river and urged all workshop participants to communicate with the highway department.

The group would add new and improve existing pedestrian bridges. They would add a new pedestrian crossing just north of the confluence of the Schuylkill and Tulpehocken. A second crossing was proposed to be hung underneath the Buttonwood Bridge. A third crossing would be to remove the "hamster cage" over the RACC Bridge and add more attractive railing. A fourth crossing would be incorporated into the existing Bingaman Bridge. And a fifth crossing would be at the proposed South Sixth Street Bridge to complete a link at the end of Heritage Park to the Thun Trail towards Gibraltar.

The group then addressed priorities for several time periods, taking up Year One objectives first.

First, the group would develop a festival area around the Penn Bridge and RACC. It would upgrade the trail system, lighting it, placing signs along it and directing people to it. A first area of emphasis would be between the RACC festival area and what the group hopes will develop into an expanded arts area at Canal Street, effectively anchoring this portion of the river.

A detailed river access plan should be developed in year one, emphasizing links into adjoining neighborhoods. The area around RACC should be landscaped. The Pennsylvania Highway Department should be visited by a Reading area delegation regarding its plans for Highways 222/422 in West Reading. The group called for developing a safety plan for the riverfront.

A marketing strategy and an events program plan want top be developed. A n identity and theme for the riverfront should be selected.

A citizens planning workshop about future uses of the Dana site should be conducted; the group noted that there had not been citizen involvement in discussions about this important piece of riverfront to date.

There should be an investigation into providing recreational opportunities for young people on the river, and a plan prepared.

Selective brush removal along the river's edge should be undertaken. An ongoing maintenance program should be established along with this action.

Energizing the entire effort would be a non-profit "riverfront enhancement corporation" which would hire a staff to executive the numerous initiatives cited. The idea here is that one or more staff has a fulltime focus on the riverfront every working day.

Property owners along the river have to be consulted with, to learn what their plans are and to discuss the various initiatives developed at the workshop and incorporated into the consensus plan.

At the end of year one, the group recommended a River Festival be held including neighborhood celebrations, bringing in a carnival as the first step toward a proposed amusement arcade... This event would not only serve as a windup for the accomplishments of the year but serve as a kickoff for year two.

An activity that should be under way in year is to begin land acquisitions of key riverfront parcels, putting them in public (or semi-public) ownership.

Five-year objectives that is goals to be accomplished by mid-2009 (assuming a start in mid-2003), would be the following:

Establishment of the Heritage Trail along the river's edge, as well as perpendicular links to the Northside neighborhood, and filling in all the missing links to same. Cross river loops would be established, meaning new pedestrian bridges would be built. Key street improvements would be made. Along the promenade portion of the trail would be commercial installations, permanent and temporary.

Continued coordination with the highway department would be necessary.

The Penn Bridge/RACC festival center would be established and running and the necessary support framework provided,

The group wants to see an inflatable dam designed and a permit sought in this time frame, the aim being to permit more dry season recreational uses of the river.

At the Dana site, no matter what uses it is to have on it, there wants to be a commitment to providing public access along he river's edge.

Housing would be encouraged along the river, both new and rehabilitated, thus building the tax base. Land acquisition would continue.

In this time period, a museum/cultural center would be under development. Fishing piers and boating access points would be provided, and outdoor "rooms" along the river established an amphitheaters built, where jazz concerts could be held for instance. Having events with appeal to young people was felt important, ranging from children's play areas to the amusement arcade to skateboarding sites.. And lastly, an ecosystem program would be developed, and flora and fauna native to the area preserved and restored.

In the 2010-2020 time frame, the inflatable dam would be installed (if permitted) and links to other trails and recreational areas in the vicinity established.

Waterfront Center Team Recommendations

These suggestions aim to build on, prioritize and synthesize the discussions and recommendations by the participating citizens that took place on May 2 and 3, 2003.

- **Development Entity.** First, we suggest that the Riverfront Advisory Group reconstitute itself into a not-for-profit development entity. If it wants to keep its acronym, it could be the Riverfront Action Group, Inc. Otherwise it might be named the Reading Area Riverfront Action Group, Inc. (RARAG). It should have the authority to acquire land.

- **Executive Director.** RAG's first major action would be to hire an executive director and such other staff as needed and which could be afforded. We believe foundation funding may be available to help with this given the considerable conservation/environmental education emphasis that the riverfront work will necessarily involve.

In order for a Riverfront Revival to occur in Reading, an organization with the single focus of bringing it about is a must, in our opinion. It needs to be led by a person who every day has the challenge of moving forward the multiple agendas involved. Whether this is a new entity (our preference) or a component of an existing non-profit organization doesn't matter just as long as it has the following characteristics: Is led by a person with a passion for the riverfront and youthful energy regardless of chronological age, who preferably has events-management and marketing experience as well as a planning background, is willing to work long hours and who will be able to develop support from within the city and county governments, the private sector, the third, non-profit sector and the neighborhoods.

To put it in the negative, we don't believe that a volunteer committee or a person with multiple assignments can get the job done in an undertaking of this complexity and in a river corridor and watershed as challenging as the Schuylkill.

- **Organize Cleanup Weekends.** RAG as constituted now wants to develop a cadre of volunteers to work on the river cleanup. Whether it be existing groups such as the Boy/Girl Scouts and/or a separate river group doesn't matter as much as reaching into the community and beginning to develop a river consciousness and commitment. These will be needed for the long pull. Initially two steps can be taken: trash clearance along the banks and

in the river itself, and trail clearance. Get the cities to help coordinate the clean-ups (with trucks, brooms and shovels), and get groups working on river segments each weekend. Make sure the work is publicized. Document the amounts and kinds of debris removed. On Labor Day throw a party for all the volunteers with food and music.

Develop a realistic strategy of how much can be accomplished before Sept. 1 (basically about nine weeks). This may mean moving from the central riverfront out, or picking certain areas such as the trail below American Chain and Cable, this fishing pier area in West Reading and/or the area where the trail leads to the bridge sculpture and boat launch.

- **Prepare Clearance Plan.** All groups at the workshop made a goal of increasing visibility of the river, which will involve brush clearance. They also stipulated, and we concur, that landscape expertise needs to be engaged first to make sure only trash trees and shrubs are taken and that bank stabilization is not affected. Armed with the plan, organize the volunteers to tackle the easier work, get a contractor for the heavier work. This step alone will have immediate impact. Call it "Brush Up the Riverfront." Publicize the plan so that people understand that trees aren't being haphazardly taken down.

- **Adopt/Perfect a Plan.** A first activity for the new RAG would be to reach out into the various components of the community with the results of the workshop and to solicit additional ideas and reactions. After a reasonable period of outreach, adopt the result as a preliminary concept plan to chart the course of the first year or so. The plan should then be taken another step and refined, with appropriate engineering, architectural and landscape contributions. The refined plan would be subject to the oversight of RAG and its executive director.

- **Develop a Strategy.** We suggest that RAG give its executive director the initial assignment of developing a one-year strategic plan. Given the large number and wide range of the suggested initiatives, and the complexity of many of them, it's clear that initial actions should be carefully selected. Suggested characteristics is that they be visible, easily grasped and popular.

- **Step Up Police Patrols.** There were expressions during the workshop about security and how people felt unsafe/uneasy along the river. The cleanup and clearance steps above will help alleviate this feeling some, but clearly a larger police presence would be desirable, a "River Watch."

If police are on bikes, have them visit trail sections often. Have patrol cars swing by periodically. Have social services work on getting homeless off the river and into shelters. If RACC became a contributing member of the downtown organization, would its uniformed ambassadors come to the riverfront?

- **Early Actions.** Here are a series of suggestions for actions that can be taken in the near-term which have the overall objective of increasing the visibility of the river. Publicize everything!

- § Create simple map showing the existing trail system. This can be a photocopied handout and could include key facts about the Reading area's history and environment.

- § Organize a series of nature/discovery walks. Could be oriented to different age groups and interests, i.e., birdwatchers, history buffs. Work with the Audubon or other environmental groups and the historical society.

- § Work with RACC on the possibility of enhancing the area in front of the library with landscaping, as little as adding shrubs and potted plants. Could the food operation set up mobile vending machines to enable people to eat along the river? Could added seating be provided?

- § Begin interpreting the canal history. In the area around the old metal bridges near the library, use landscape treatment of some kind to suggest the illusion of water. In the longer-term this could be done artfully with tile or another hard surface.

- § Begin planning of children's play spaces. These were a strong focus during the workshop that we heartily endorse as they will bring families to the riverfront. Involve children and parents in a planning workshop for same. Research play spaces for children with special needs.

- § Encourage and work with RACC to redesign the pedestrian bridge to make it a focal point on the river, while taking into account liability issues.

- **Begin Property Discussions.** To accomplish many of the ambitious goals of the workshop (museums, festival grounds, amusement park, arts center, and the like were all mentioned) more territory in public (or non-profit) ownership is desirable. Begin discussion with such key property holders as the Penske organization to see what its plans are and whether they might be

interested in a land swap or acquisition of some or all of their downtown holdings, for instance. RAG should undertake this together with RACC as the other key downtown riverfront property owner now.

- **Greenway/Trail Mapping, Design and Designation.**

The present trail system should be clearly mapped if it is not already, and the gaps identified. A design contract should be let for its enhancement, dealing with such issues as suggested width, paving material, lighting, benches and lookout sites, desired new pedestrian bridges, and what to name the system within Reading and West Reading. In the workshop it was variously a trail, a greenway, a Heritage Trail or a promenade at least in part. Coordinate actions on the trail with the Schuylkill River Greenway Association. What it does not want to be called is a bikeway because that instills in the minds of bikers that it is theirs and theirs alone, when its uses should be for people on foot as well as on wheels of varied sorts. Desirable where space allows is splitting the trail between these two basic use types.

A successful trail system will need to have continuous loops rather than the present dead-end segments, as well as frequent, well-defined entrances and perpendicular pathways to nearby neighborhoods.

- **Develop Logo and Name.** These should be early actions, but carefully thought through as names and symbols are important and they will be with you a long time. We use "Reading Riverfront Revival" as it suggests you are bringing back something you established earlier, which is fact what would be done. Might it be "Reading Area Riverfront Revival"? (RARR). Or "Reading's Opportunity for A Riverfront Revival" (ROARR).

- **Light Penn Bridge Artfully.** The workshop groups liked the idea of lighting three of four bridges. We suggest selecting one initially (Penn) and trying to get that done soon and artfully. Obtain someone with bridge-lighting experience to design the lighting as opposed to just installing some bulbs. It would make an instant impact and symbolize the unity of the two communities. Would the electric utility be willing to contribute to this? Who will handle maintenance?

- **Resist "Big Idea" But Develop Symbol.** We are leery of the notion that a community necessarily needs a "big idea" to succeed. It leads to questionable projects. For us the Schuylkill River is the big idea itself. At the same time, the riverfront effort needs a symbol. We suggest it is in the arena of a multi-purpose riverfront center and festival space (named for whoever might

donate the land). It would house both educational functions and such commercial ventures as food service, bike and blading rental/repair, fishing shop, having rentable function space and a crafts shop featuring work from the area. It could also house a visitors center except we liked the suggestion of using the old firehouse for this. Many workshop attendees spoke about the area's rich history reaching back to the Indians and including the industrial and transportation heritage, the varied ethnic groups that want to be celebrated. These and the area's natural values all could form the basis for educational displays in a museum, but also along the greenway. Young people prefer the latter approach, a high school student at a workshop in another city informed his group. The canal heritage also has many interpretive opportunities that could be selectively incorporated into the riverfront center and on the trail.

- **Plan River Festival.** Many at the workshop recalled fondly the Scenic River Days. With a Reading Riverfront Revival being launched, it is time to revive it in a size and style that fits today's audience. Aim to have it organized by spring of 2004. This would be a prime responsibility for RAG.

- **Plan Dana and American Chain Sites.** We like the idea put forth in one group of having a community planning workshop for the Dana site. We'd extend it to include the American Chain and Cable site and the neighborhoods nearby. These obviously are prime riverfront locations and the best uses for the long-run benefit of the Reading area need to be thought through carefully as well as to gain understanding of what their limitations are.

- **Relocate River Road.** We endorse this suggestion to relocate the road to the downtown side of the Penske complex, as it will serve to expand the present river park without a significant effect on traffic flow. While Penske remains in its present location, truck parking should be banned on River Road.