

Lancaster City Downtowners

April 25, 2006

Minutes

Facilitator: Rod Houser

Attendance: approximately 28 people

Topic: Development ideas for downtown Lancaster compatible with “aging at home” models such as Beacon Hill Village in Boston

Resource persons: Joe Wagman, CEO of Wagman construction and Eric Menzer, project developer for Wagman Construction, York PA.

1. Introductions

To introduce the Downtowners group to our guest speakers, Rod gave a brief review of the history of the group and each person said where they are currently living and their particular interest in downtown Lancaster as a viable community for retirement.

2. Wagman Construction Inc—Wagman Construction is a 100 year old family business that consists of two major companies. G. A. & F.C. Wagman, Inc builds bridges and is involved in heavy construction. Wagman Construction, Inc. does industrial development, large scale development of senior care facilities and of particular interest to Downtowners, smaller scale condo, loft and cohousing construction in the city of York. Joe gave a PowerPoint presentation that included many photos of work they have done.

- Lofts on George Street in York are an example of higher end downtown residential development. These units have been created in an old warehouse. Excellent light, beautiful wood floors and a spacious feel are typical of these units.
- A project done in cooperation with the York YMCA features major refurbishing of traditional row houses at scattered sites but in one general neighborhood. From a developer’s point of view, a project has greater economic viability if at least seven similar units are included.
- Of particular interest to our group was a project that featured a basic town house construction that included the best of green design (sustainable architecture) in highly efficient units with universal design that could fit into many different “skins,” i.e. exterior envelope, that would be compatible to the location where the units would be built such as downtown Lancaster. If at least seven such units could be constructed either adjacent to each other or in close proximity, the economy of scale could bring construction costs as low as \$92 per square foot—a very competitive price in today’s housing market. Joe suggested that while retrofitting old downtown row homes or converting warehouses to condominiums can make very attractive living spaces, they do come with significantly higher sticker prices than new construction. The challenge for planning new construction in areas close to downtown centers is finding enough available space in a small area to make the project economically feasible.
- Development of the style of housing compatible with the needs of an aging population carries economic risks for a developer. Joe suggested that Wagman Construction would not be likely to do speculation development of the types of units he described in an area like downtown Lancaster. However, were he to be able to work with a group of potential buyers who would make an upfront investment in such a project, the risk would be softened and such construction would be more likely to happen.

3. Beacon Hill Village—On its website, Beacon Hill Village in Boston describes itself as follows: “Faced with the prospect of leaving the neighborhood they love in order to obtain the services of a retirement community, a group of long-time Beacon Hill residents decided to create a better alternative—Beacon Hill Village, a "virtual retirement community" designed to make remaining at home a safe, comfortable and cost-effective solution.” As a non-profit organization, Beacon Hill Village partners with service providers in the Boston area to provide services and programs to its members more cost effectively than most traditional retirement communities.

- Values and goals expressed among Downtowners during this meeting are consistent with the persons who have formed Beacon Hill Village. Rod referred briefly to Beacon Hill Village during the opening and suggested that our group may be interested in acquiring their business plan for ideas of how we could develop some version of this virtual retirement community idea in downtown Lancaster.

4. Other Thoughts

- Some thoughts from Jim Kalish: There are two main interests of the group. 1) building/rebuilding and 2) forming an intentional community/social-economic-supportive network of downtowners. Both are needed. Fixing up a building to bring 10-15 more people/families downtown to live in a setting conducive for "older" people, while limited in scope, and resource heavy, could be seen as a model for what might be done in the future on a larger scale. Creating an explicit network and support system to allow residents to stay (or move to) a house/apartment/condo and remain there over the long haul, could reach perhaps a hundred or more, with relatively modest resource requirements, in a relatively short time-frame. In either case, there is a real argument to make sure the "community" is economically and

socially diverse, which will not likely happen without safeguards being build in from the beginning.

For some in the group, there is interest in both directions; others would give priority to one or the other. It would be best if we could do both. There is a potential synergism at work here. In terms of leadership and skills, public perception, seed money, it would be easier to "sell" the idea of a retirement condo, if there was a sufficient community beyond the walls of such a building to provide culture, shopping, entertainment and a support system.

- Thoughts from June Lang: The Village Green concept is a favorite of mine, built in an urban environment in the US. The English version is the garden city built in the rural environment. A few years ago I visited the Village Green on the outskirts of L.A. I loved it. My friends who live there love it. Cars are parked on the perimeter and the residents have a their own mini Central Park in the middle of the village. There are no streets going through it, only 17 garage courts penetrating into the community around the perimeter. Three parking spaces per unit are provided, and every unit has a private walled patio; many have balconies, also. The balance of private to public is masterful, making it an idyllic place to live, for people in every stage of life. I believe a version of this could be created in Lancaster city, using ideas that were presented at the April 25 meeting.

5. Next Steps—It's probably time that we "do something," and I'm (Rod speaking) thinking that taking a look at the Beacon Hill Village model and asking how it could be adapted for the Lancaster community might be a good next step.

- I may be asking some of you to help form some sort of steering committee to guide us through these next steps.
- It also may be time to start raising some seed money—the materials from Beacon Hill carry a sticker price of \$300. Would dues to stay on the email list be appropriate?

6. Stay tuned!