

The Towering Plan To Revive A Borough

By Francie Scott, Special to The Inquirer

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George J. Rafferty has seen many developers with big dreams to revitalize Conshohocken come and go during his 28 years on the Conshohocken Borough Planning Commission.

To pump new life into the former steel town, developers have proposed everything from grandiose shopping centers to quaint shopping strips, motels and offices. Rafferty, 80, said some of the ideas looked good, but most of the plans never went anywhere.

Last month, however, Rafferty joined about 600 other guests, including Gov. Casey, for a groundbreaking ceremony for the Tower Bridge project. The business complex, which is being developed by Oliver Tyrone Pulver Corp. of Philadelphia, will include four 15-floor office towers, two in Conshohocken and two in West Conshohocken Borough.

The guests celebrated with barbecued beef and beer on the Front Street site in West Conshohocken, where the first building of the complex is to be located. They toasted the partnership between borough officials and private developers, and the public financing that had made it all possible.

"It's a thing we never dreamed of happening here a couple of years ago," Rafferty said.

Borough officials and developers say the Tower Bridge complex will succeed where other proposals have failed because of the planned completion of the Blue Route. The juncture of the Blue Route and the Schuylkill Expressway in Conshohocken, which is about a quarter-mile from the site of the Tower Bridge office buildings, is likely to become the third-busiest intersection in the state. It is estimated that 59,000 vehicles will use the proposed interchange every day.

The Blue Route, which will link Interstate 95 in Delaware County with the Pennsylvania Turnpike, is expected to be completed in 1990.

The face of the former steel town began to change in 1984, when Meehan-Weinmann Inc. of Conshohocken completed its first office building, on Fayette Street. But it is Oliver Tyrone Pulver's \$300 million Tower Bridge project that will transform the skyline of Conshohocken and West Conshohocken during the next decade. The high-rise buildings will cast their shadows over the lines of modest rowhouses on both sides of the Schuylkill.

Tower Bridge alone is expected to add 1.9 million square feet of office and hotel space and 260,541 square feet for retail stores and restaurants on riverside property in both boroughs.

In addition, Meehan-Weinmann intends to construct three office buildings on the 14 acres it owns in the lower end of Conshohocken. And Acorn Development Corp. of King of Prussia recently began construction on the first phase of a \$60 million, 400,000-square-foot office complex in West Conshohocken.

Officials say the Tower Bridge, Meehan-Weinmann and Acorn projects will constitute the largest development ever built in Montgomery County.

"Our challenge is to try and link the old with the new," said John F. Nugent, an economic development consultant to both boroughs. "I guess my whole philosophy is: What you build ought to be available to everyone."

Residents say they expect traffic snarls and increases in crime and property taxes to accompany the office towers, but many are embracing the proposed projects.

"We think it's good; the town was dying without it," said Diane Westburg, 27, who lives on First Avenue and sells newspapers at the Conshohocken News Agency, near two proposed construction sites. "I'm looking forward to it. It will bring people back to town. It's been slow. It's depressing."

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Even before Conshohocken's steel furnaces began to close in the early 1970s, borough officials had started looking for ways to keep the town alive.

Officials such as Rafferty and Conshohocken Council President Gerald M. McTamney had worked for urban renewal since the mid-1960s. At that time, a comprehensive plan prepared by the Montgomery County Planning Commission said that "commercial and industrial activities were beginning to lag in the borough," and that the blighted area in the lower end was "extensive enough to warrant total clearance and redevelopment."

"We had to do something," McTamney said. "Our industry was gone. There were no jobs. We have 35 percent (of the population who are) elderly."

Architect Louis Sauer, formerly of Philadelphia, proposed a 24-acre redevelopment area in the lower end featuring shops, offices, motels and houses clustered around two multi-level parking garages.

The borough applied to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) for \$5.6 million for the plan in 1966, but the money was not granted until 1974. By that time, shopping malls had been built in neighboring Plymouth Meeting and King of Prussia and inflation had taken its toll.

"The plan and the budget and everything associated with it was eight years old before it was funded," Nugent said.

Although the plan was abandoned, borough officials proceeded with urban renewal. During the late 1970s, 125 families and 30 businesses were moved from the area designated for redevelopment and their properties were demolished.

In 1978, another redevelopment plan was submitted by developer Harold Epstein, who envisioned a shopping center around the Italianate firehouse of the George Washington Fire Company on Fayette Street, in the redevelopment area. Inspired by Peddler's Village in Bucks County, Epstein proposed calling it Fire House Village.

But Epstein abandoned the project in 1980 because of high interest rates and inflation.

The late 1970s and early 1980s were painful years for borough officials. Many residents were angry because their houses had been demolished, but nothing had been built on the 24 acres of vacant land.

Meehan-Weinmann then appeared on the scene with a plan for the Pleasant Valley Business Center in 1980, but construction did not begin in the redevelopment area until 1983, when Meehan-Weinmann built 40 low- and moderate-income apartments.

Meehan-Weinmann has since completed two four-story office buildings, which are almost fully occupied, for the Pleasant Valley Business Center. The first building, on Fayette Street, was completed in August 1984, and the second, on West Elm Street, was finished last summer.

Donald W. Pulver, the principal of Oliver Tyrone Pulver, said his company had been considering a project in the area for seven or eight years, but waited for word that the Blue Route would be completed.

"The week it happened, we started to acquire property," he said, adding, "It will succeed because the location is so incredibly great."

Another ingredient in Conshohocken's formula for success is the availability of public money. Both Meehan-Weinmann office buildings were partly financed by Urban Development Action Grants (UDAGs), which Conshohocken is eligible to receive because of its beleaguered economy.

The grants are given to private developers at low rates of interest; the money is repaid to the borough, which is required to use it for capital improvements. Meehan-Weinmann was lent \$630,000 for the first building and \$770,000 for the second.

Conshohocken also sponsored a \$4.7 million UDAG, awarded in October, for the first of the Tower Bridge buildings, in West Conshohocken. Last Thursday, a second grant for the Tower Bridge project - \$5.725 million for a 320-room hotel to be built in West Conshohocken - was announced by HUD.

Last year, the two boroughs were designated enterprise development areas by the state, an action expected to bring in more grants and low-interest loans. The enterprise-development-area program was established in 1983 as part of Gov. Thornburgh's economic initiative for strapped communities. The money can be used to repair crumbling roads and bridges, demolish dilapidated buildings and acquire land for new development.

McTamney attributes much of Conshohocken's success in gaining public financing to Nugent's ability to write grant applications.

Before coming to Conshohocken, Nugent worked on redevelopment projects, including a flood-recovery program in Johnstown, with the Atlantic City Housing and Urban Renewal Agency and Direction Associates, a Philadelphia consulting firm that has moved to Spring House. After that, he said, he cashed in his life-insurance policies to open his own consulting business in Conshohocken in November 1982.

"There must be public/private partnership," Nugent said. "We are basically the creators and managers of the private/public partnership. We bring a Conshohocken and a Meehan-Weinmann to the table."

Nugent estimated that more than \$40 million in public money had come to Conshohocken during the last decade.

"It may have been the largest investment of federal money per capita nationally," he said.

Pulver said he chose Conshohocken and West Conshohocken as the sites of his new project because of their location. He added that "in the balance," public financing "is a plus."

"What public funding does is enables you to do something a better way so that the results have a greater impact," he said.

As developers, planners and politicians complete a formal development plan for the boroughs, residents are wondering how it will affect their ways of life. They wonder if the Conshohockens will lose the small-town atmosphere that many cherish.

Tim Ingram, who works as a shipper and receiver for Young Windows in Conshohocken, expressed mixed feelings about the changes that will occur when the projects are completed.

"In a way, I like it, but I don't like it because it might become like a city," Ingram said as he sipped a beer at the George Washington Fire Company bar on West Elm Street last week.

But Ingram and volunteer bartender Mary Petrucelli, 37, who like Ingram is a lifelong Conshohocken resident, said they were encouraged by the friendliness of the office workers who had come to the borough with the companies that had leased the two Meehan-Weinmann office buildings. They said that the workers patronized local businesses and that one company, Fund Plan Services, which moved to the borough last August, had fielded a softball team for local competition.

"They're as crazy as we are," Petrucelli said. "They're a lot of our business right now."

The development also appeals to budding entrepreneurs such as Ed Smith, 24, a printer who lives on Hector Street, although he noted that "one of the towers is going to be right outside my back door."

Smith said he wanted to start a floor-cleaning business, adding, "I could make a living off four buildings. . . . It could be very beneficial to what I'm after."

Smith and Greg Herbert, 28, an economist with the U.S. Department of Labor in Philadelphia who lives on Colwell Lane, discussed the future of Conshohocken over beers at Storti's Saloon and Restaurant on East First Avenue last week.

Smith and Herbert, who said they had grown up in Conshohocken and had enjoyed its leisurely pace, had some concerns about the impact of the development on the residents.

"A lot of people worry that the development is going to occur, but the long-term residents of Conshohocken won't benefit from it. . . . Taxes will go up at such a rate that the people who (now) live here can't afford it," Herbert said, adding that officials should make some provisions to protect them.

McTamney, however, is not worried about the integration of the residents and the office workers.

"We had huge factories here," he said, referring to Alan Wood Steel, Lee Tires and John Wood, which manufactures steel products. "No matter what we put down there, Conshy is always going to be Conshy. It isn't the big buildings that make the town. It's the people."
