

# LANDMARK TOWNS REGIONAL REVITALIZATION STRATEGY

## **Introduction**

*The Landmark Towns Initiative is a cooperative venture between the historic boroughs of Bristol, Morrisville, New Hope and Yardley Pennsylvania*

The purpose of the Landmark Towns Initiative is to establish a regional approach to economic development and community revitalization focused on the commercial opportunities and growth in tourism identified by four the Delaware riverfront boroughs of Bristol, Morrisville, New Hope and Yardley Bucks County.

To pursue these opportunities, the four municipalities joined with the Delaware & Lehigh Heritage Corridor Commission Inc., in a 'Cooperative Venture' in the spring of 2006 and produced a scope of work and a work plan. This \$25,000 planning effort, (see attached) was self funded and has resulted in the development of this following strategic plan.

Since September of 2006, staff of the Delaware & Lehigh National Heritage Corridor Commission and the selected consulting firm of Keystone Heritage Group LLC. have worked with the four municipalities to develop this strategic plan. This effort, which has been done in regular consultation with Ms. Antoinette Crawford Major, Regional Director DCED, has included town meeting and site visits within each municipality, meetings with various stakeholders and regular monthly meetings of the Landmark Towns of Bucks County Steering Committee

They are now seeking the Commonwealth's support, through the New Communities Program, for participation in the multi-year Regional Coordinators Program

## **Elements of the Landmark Towns Strategic Plan**

This strategic plan possesses six elements, which together form the framework of the envisioned regional initiative. These include:

- Identification and Agreement on the Unifying Themes of the Initiative
- Establishment and Agreement on a Regional Coordinating Structure
- Identification of the Shared Regional Challenges & Opportunities
- An Assessment of Community Specific Challenges & Opportunities
- Identification Regional Support and Financial Resources
- The Role of the Regional Coordinator

## **Unifying Themes**

The Landmark Towns of Bucks County share a common bond, built upon their national significance, aesthetic vistas, remarkable architectural heritage, cultural contributions, location and history. Bound together by the Delaware Canal and the Delaware River, they provide a unique sense of place in the development of commerce and culture from the earliest days of the American experience. Together they offer a sense of possibility and continuity, where our vital past can be carried forward into a robust and dynamic future. Of the unifying themes that bind these towns together, the two greatest are the Delaware River and the Delaware Canal, whose historic, recreational, aesthetic and commercial value, attract hundreds of thousands of visitors each year.

### Delaware River

At 330 miles in length, the Delaware is the longest free-flowing river east of the Mississippi River and serves as a major migration corridor for birds and the American Shad. Even though the human population in the river basin is larger than that of 40 states, the Delaware continues to support an astounding array of wildlife, including the largest winter populations of bald and golden eagles in the East.

The four Landmark Towns in Bucks County are each located along the shores of the Delaware River, extending from New Hope Borough in the north to Bristol Borough in the south. According to the US Census, the combined population of these communities in 2000 was roughly 25,000 residents.

In 2000, a 40-mile segment of Delaware riverfront, including much of waterfront along the Landmark Towns, became part of the National Wild and Scenic Rivers Systems. This designation recognizes free-flowing rivers with exceptional natural, recreational, historical and cultural resources. According to the National Park Service, of the 3.5 million miles of rivers within the United States, only 11,303 river miles, representing just over one quarter of one percent, are included in the National Wild and Scenic Rivers System.

In the more than three centuries since the arrival of the first European settlers, the Delaware River corridor has continued to play a unique role in the evolving life of our nation and the new world. William Penn's first home in the new world is located on its shores, along the Landmark Towns more than 26 mile corridor. On Christmas Eve 1776, Washington and his troops crossed, at what is now Washington Crossing State Historical Park, to defeat the Hessians and rescue a faltering revolution. The park also lies within the Landmark Towns corridor.

And it was historic Summerseat, in Morrisville Borough, that served as Washington's headquarters as he planned his famous attack on the Hessian soldiers at Trenton. Summerseat was also home to two of signers of the Declaration of Independence, George Clymer, and later Robert Morris. Indeed, the Borough of Morrisville takes its name from Robert Morris, the 'Financier of the American Revolution.'

At the northern end of the Landmark Towns, the remarkable landscapes and scenic vistas of the river gave birth to the Pennsylvania Impressionist's 'New Hope School' of artists.

### Delaware Canal

The development of the Delaware Canal in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century along the river corridor, followed by the introduction of the railroad, heralded the coming of the Industrial Revolution to the river's shores.

Starting in 1832, mule teams pulled specially constructed barges through a system of locks round-the-clock on this 60-mile canal along the Delaware River. Forty million tons of coal and other cargo were hauled between Easton and Bristol, Pa., until competition of the railroad forced its closure in 1931.

In those years, it served as a vital link in the growing prosperity of each of the Landmark towns, particularly Yardley and Bristol, where the terminus of the canal was located. Both Yardley, established in 1682 and Bristol, established in 1681 were two of the earliest communities established in Pennsylvania. Neither Philadelphia nor Trenton existed when those two towns were founded.

And during the Civil War, both Bristol and Yardley were stations for the Underground Railroad, an escape route for slaves. According to an early history of Bucks County, *"During the later years of the slavery agitation a branch of the "underground railroad" passed through Bucks County, starting from Bristol"*. Known hiding places in Yardley included an area under the eaves of the Continental Hotel. This historic structure still stands and today is known as the Continental Tavern.

### Shared Characteristics Built Upon Unifying Themes

The common geographic, historical and cultural heritage of the four Landmark Towns has enabled them to identify four unique and shared characteristics on which to build a regional coordinated effort.

**First**, an abundance of unique colonial and pre-colonial historic structures, including houses, churches, and properties present an unequalled opportunity to develop thematic 'interpretive' and self guided tours

**Second**, special qualities shared by each of Landmark Towns... river and canal walks, theater, superior restaurants, night life and a variety of festivals, all in an authentic and attractive setting

**Third**, a shopping experience in Landmark Towns that is safe, accessible, unhurried, relaxed, varied and leisurely in contrast to the stressful, predictable and often frantic pace of 'mall' shopping

**Fourth**, the presence of Washington Crossing Park and Pennsbury Manor, both of which lie along the Landmark Towns corridor and which can be incorporated into the overall Landmark Towns experience

### **Establishment of a Regional Coordinating Structure**

Over the past year, the success of the Steering Committee has provided a framework on which to build a more permanent management structure for the Landmark Towns initiative.

As envisioned, the governing mechanism for the Regional Coordinators Program will be a sixteen member Landmark Towns Board of Directors, composed of four representatives from each town, to include:

- A local elected official
- A local appointed official
- A local civic leader
- A local merchant or business property owner

Ex officio Members will include a representative from:

Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development  
Pennsylvania Department of conservation and Natural Resources  
Pennsylvania Historic Museum commission Bucks County  
Convention and Visitors Bureau Delaware Canal Advisory  
Committee Delaware River Joint Toll Bridge Commission

A five member Executive Committee with one representative from each town and a designee of the Delaware & Lehigh Heritage Corridor Commission will be established to manage the day to day operations of the Landmark Towns initiative, in cooperation with the Regional Coordinator

## **Regional Challenges & Opportunities**

A number of core challenges and opportunities present in each of the communities was identified and will form the basis of the work undertaken by the regional Coordinator. These included:

- Improving the ease of parking in closer proximity to commercial centers
- Aggressively marketing Landmark Towns as safe and accessible, while exploring various approaches to Code enforcement designed to improve viewscales within the commercial districts
- Publicizing the special qualities of Landmark towns.. river and canal walks, theater, dining experiences, night life and a variety of festivals, all in an authentic and attractive setting
- » Improving access to and use of the river and canal for both active and passive recreation
- Utilizing the various festivals as a way to attract visitors and guests to other Landmark towns
- Developing unique products that will be marketed and sold through the Landmark Towns initiative as a long term source of funding for the regional effort
- Introducing theater, dining and tour packages to help market and 'brand' the towns
- Pursuing Initiatives designed to increase lodging accommodations within the Landmark towns
- Pursuing initiatives to utilize SEPTA access to Bristol and Yardley, to incorporate a scheduled shuttle transit system between the four towns to transport both workers and visitors along the Landmark Towns corridor
- Developing marketing approaches and an advertising campaign to promote the special qualities and attractions of the Landmark towns, highlighting unique products and services which they can offer
- Maintaining, preserving and restoring attractive and inviting Gateways that help set the tone for the visitor experience
- Inaugurating a comprehensive and coordinated highway and pedestrian signage program on access roads, along the Landmark towns route, the canal and streets of the Landmark towns

Substantial progress has already been made in a number of important areas. The Steering Committee has already secured a copyright for the name. *Landmark Towns of Bucks County*, an important step in 'branding' the corridor. Roughly half dozen unique local product manufacturers, whose well known products have world wide appeal, have been approached and initial discussions have taken place regarding the production of *Landmark Towns* products. This includes such items as Mercer Tiles, privately labeled wines from local wineries, Byers Choice figures, Lennox products and Malmark Inc. bells and chimes. We believe this initiative will prove a valuable source of future revenue for this enterprise. A web domain, *LandmarkTo-wns.com*, has also been secured and will be 'going up' in the very near future.

### **Community Specific Challenges & Opportunities**

A number of community specific challenges and opportunities were also identified that, while not immediately the responsibility of the Regional Coordinator, were seen as areas where addressing these challenges would substantially strengthen the regional effort

#### **Bristol**

- Link river front festivals into the commercial center, through gateways, traffic flow, merchant participation
- Establish inviting gateways leading up to Mill Street from the borough's municipal parking lot
- Encourage conversion of the 'backs' of buildings on Mill Street that face the municipal parking lot into 'second fronts'
- Need for careful management of the Gateway project approved for the Railroad Ave. Corridor approaching the borough from route 413
- » Opportunity along Market Street to promote revitalization aimed at increasing commercial activity within the downtown, providing an aesthetic gateway for visitors approaching from Radcliffe Street, providing increased parking, convenient to Mill Street, and connecting the commercial center to the adjoining and well maintained historic residential area

#### **Morrisville**

- Pursue initiatives designed to draw river walkers into the commercial district, while reclaiming safe pedestrian access to the canal, creating a pedestrian route that loops back to the river walk
- Focus on retail opportunities along the river, north of Williams park, on land already owned by the borough's EDC

Development of a high quality engineering plan for the DRJTBC funded infrastructure project along Bridge Street that incorporates the best elements of design, quality construction materials, including lighting, signage and curbing, along with attractive but effective traffic calming features to insure the establishment of an inviting Gateway into the borough... linking the river walk area to Bridge Street

Completion of those portions of the borough's comprehensive plan that focus on the opportunities for linking the river walk along the levee, with a well thought out development plan for borough owned areas adjacent to the Calhoun Street Bridge

## New Hope

- Manage new development in a way that strengthens and preserves the diverse, eclectic and even 'quirky' quality which makes New Hope unique
- Aggressively pursue the opportunity that a carefully designed and comprehensive development initiative of the historic Bucks County Playhouse and adjoining properties represents to provide:
- Substantially increased access to the river, through a revitalized center for the arts, and improved parking within the downtown in a park like setting,
- Pursue initiatives to relocate borough hall out of the commercial district
- Continue progress on the Canal Walk initiative, while exploring opportunities to better incorporate the operation of the *New Hope Ivyland Railroad* into the fabric of the community

## Yardley

- Incorporate improved canal and river access within the Brock Creek Corridor improvements
- Explore ways to alter the commercial mix in the downtown to increase first floor frontage for a broader mix of retail enterprises
- » Taking advantage of the funds committed to the revitalization of the Brock Creek Corridor to:
  - Increase utilization of parking at Buttonwood Park
  - Promote Lake Afton as a walking destination that connects to a revitalized commercial corridor along Afton Avenue

- Consider undertaking a Certified Redevelopment Plan for the South side of Afton Avenue, below Main Street
- Pursue opportunities to incorporate pedestrian and small boat access to the river, along with nearby parking, adjacent to the Yardley Memorial on borough owned lands

### **Identification Regional Support and Financial Resources**

A substantial degree of local financial support already exists:

Each of the Landmark communities has provided \$1,250 to date, have approved an additional \$5000 in Year I of the program and are committed to the increased annual contributions required through Year V of the program. (It should be noted that the draft funding resolutions contained in this application are in the process of being formally approved by each of the participating municipalities and will be submitted shortly.)

Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor Commission contributed \$20,000 to date and has pledged \$20,000 for Year I. An additional \$25,000 in federal funding has also been dedicated to gateway design and construction projects.

Bucks County has pledged resources from an array of sources, including the CDBG program, \$30,000 from the Convention and Visitors Bureau and Bucks County Transport Inc.

Delaware River Joint Bridge Toll Commission has pledged more than \$2 million in support for various gateway projects

The Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, (DVRPC) has pledged up to \$75,000 in support through the Transportation and Community Development Initiative

The Grundy Foundation has pledged resources to promote local artists and art venues in the Landmark Towns

### **The Role of the Regional Coordinator**

The Regional coordinator will work with Landmark Towns Board of Directors to:

- Manage budget and day to day operations
- Provide Outreach to market the Landmark Towns Initiative
- Identify opportunities for public/private partnerships, including preparing grant applications for design and facade challenge grants, Downtown Reinvestment grants and Anchor Building grants

Assist Landmark towns interested in pursuing a local Main Street initiative, in conducting the required local assessment

Inaugurate a Comprehensive Education Initiative, through workshops, seminars and public meetings on such issues as:

- Improving Code enforcement
- Historic Preservation
- Merchandising and Sales -Store Front Design -Facade Improvement

Pursue implementation of annual objectives of the 5 year Strategic Plan, based on the identified challenges and opportunities discussed earlier and outlined below:

## **Landmark Towns 5 Year Plan Outline**

### Landmark Towns Start-Up

- Establish Landmark Towns Governing Organization
- Complete Cooperative Agreement
- Secure Services of Regional Coordinator
- Provide Office and related needs of Regional Coordinator
- Prepare application and project approach for DVRPC Transportation and Community Development Initiative grant
- Incorporate Pennsbury Manor and Washington Crossing State Parks into Landmark Towns initiatives

### First Year Tasks

- Complete Property Inventory
- Identify Anchor Building Grant Candidates
- Identify Downtown Reinvestment Grant Candidates
- Develop Design/Facade Challenge Grant Criteria
- Highlight public safety
- Produce Visitors Guide and Events Brochure
- Identify and Develop unique Landmark Towns products
- Develop River and Canal Themed events
- Use festivals to attract visitors to other Landmark towns
- Promote night life

## Second Year Tasks

- Highlight unique products and services
- Improve ease of parking
- Seminar Series
  - Improving Code enforcement
  - Historic Preservation
  - Merchandising and Sales -Store Front Design -Fa9ade Improvement
- Provide attractive and inviting 'Gateways'
- Introduce theater, dining and tour "packages"
- Market and 'brand' the towns as 'authentic'
- Assist Landmark towns secure Main Street Designation

## Third Year Tasks

- Improved River and Canal Access
- Secure Anchor Grant Project funds
- Secure and Award Competitive Design /Facade Funds

## Fourth and Fifth Year Tasks

- Increase lodging accommodations
- Establish Bus/Trolley shuttle along corridor