

# A community battles back: 'In the '70s, it was a little scary coming to Braddock.'

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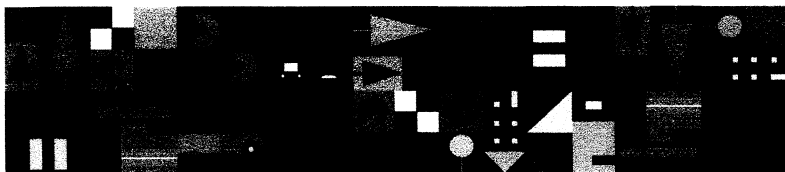
By Ed Blazina / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

For nearly 60 years, Braddock and Rankin — and to a lesser extent neighboring Swissvale and North Braddock — have been looking to rebuild the economy on the east side of the Monongahela River after post-World War II mobility, suburban shopping centers and the decline of the steel industry combined to leave the towns in near ruins.

First, the Mon-Fayette Expressway and later the proposed renovation of Braddock General Hospital, then the future redevelopment of the former Carrie Furnace site in Rankin and Swissvale were viewed as the lifelines that the area needed.

The highway is still pending and has been redesigned to go to Monroeville instead. UPMC pulled the plug on the now-demolished hospital. And Carrie Furnace remains a vacant site that could be part of Allegheny County's push to lure Amazon's second headquarters to the area.

But slowly and steadily, improvements are coming.



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Whether it's Superior Motors and Portogallo Peppers 'n At restaurants and businesses like Phillips Tank & Structure and Unicentric in Braddock, proposed housing along Bell Avenue in North Braddock or the upcoming expansion of Kromaly's Printing & Signs and the crowds at the

farmers market at the Swissvale municipal parking lot, the boroughs are showing more life in the last few years than they have in generations.

What's the driving force? Officials point to the closure of the hospital in 2010, renewed cooperation among the communities and millennials who have no memory of the boroughs as a crime-ridden area to avoid.

"I think there are a lot of positive things happening," said Barry Kukovich, director of community affairs for Peoples Natural Gas Co. "The attitude is changing, largely because of millennials who don't remember what it was like before, so they aren't afraid to go there."

Those positives caused borough leaders and the Enterprise Zone Corp. of Braddock two years ago to approach the utility company, which services the area, for marketing advice to build on that momentum. The company provided an intern to work with the loan agency for a year and connected the group with its ad agency, Z Brand.

The result, announced late last year, is a new approach to marketing the boroughs jointly under a new name designed to build off their location — East Shore.

Bill Pfoff, Rankin councilman and president of the Enterprise Zone, said there has been "a lot of inter-borough cooperation" recently.

For example, Rankin and Swissvale joined forces in the last two years to rework their zoning laws to make it easier to redevelop the Carrie Furnace site — about 105 acres of flat, riverfront land across the Monongahela River from The Waterfront shopping and entertainment complex. In addition, the four boroughs are working on a joint development plan.

"That's a recognition of the four communities that they know they are stronger together," said Evan Indianer, CEO of Unicentric, a firm that provides software to help social service agencies like Achieva and New York City food banks keep track of clients.

Three years ago, Mr. Indianer moved his nine employees from the Strip District to a renovated former church and synagogue on Talbot Avenue in Braddock after visiting the borough for another event.

"One of the things is there is a lot of synergy there," Mr. Indianer said. "They're very welcoming to visitors and they help us any way they can."

Part of the energy grew out of one of the area's darkest hours: UPMC's decision to close Braddock General in 2010 just after announcing a major renovation to change the hospital's entrance to the once-thriving Braddock Avenue.

County officials had planned to use the improvements at the medical center — the borough's largest employer — as the centerpiece for building up the area in anticipation of marketing the Carrie Furnace site.

Public pressure couldn't change UPMC's decision, but officials used the opportunity to replace the hospital with about two dozen housing units that quickly filled up. A block-long public plaza in front of the housing should be finished this summer. An office building where Allegheny Health Network opened an urgent care center and state Rep. Paul Costa has an office was built on the site of a former hospital parking lot.

These days, the 500 block of Braddock Avenue across from the office building is a fairly bustling area.

Brew Gentlemen — a craft beer pub started by two former Carnegie Mellon University students who decided to make beer their life's work — opened in 2014. Parking app provider Meterfeeder has offices in a building that two generations ago housed the Loyal Order of the Moose club and the weekly Braddock Free Press. Mexican restaurant Brassero grew last year from a food truck that visited the pub to a restaurant in a former bakery down the street.

Another firm, Phillips Tank & Structure, will move about 15 engineers into the old newspaper building soon, with room for double that many. A Super Mart convenience store also opened in that block in recent months.

Lenny Phillips, president of the company that constructs and repairs storage tanks across the country, has been sharing property on Talbot Avenue with Gray Welding since 2013.

He considers the area "super cool" because he's a history buff and he can ride his bike to work from Point Breeze, then take trips during slow times along riverfront trails to Pittsburgh's Duck Hollow on the river near the Homestead Grays Bridge.

With his company hiring two engineers every six months, Mr. Phillips said, it seemed natural to find office space elsewhere in Braddock.

“Now, you have all this stuff happening in the area,” he said. “It’s awesome for visitors to be able to take them to The Waterfront.”

And the area is becoming more known for restaurants.

Braddock has gone from no sit-down eateries two years ago to three today, with acclaimed chef Kevin Sousa’s Superior Motors being named one of the country’s 10 best new restaurants in the past year. In addition to Brassero, Bob Portogallo moved his restaurant featuring Italian beef sandwiches in November 2016 from Swissvale to a former doughnut shop in Braddock. It has quickly expanded to include bocce courts and an outdoor patio area for live music.

“Back in the ’70s, it was a little scary coming to Braddock,” said the Swissvale native, who left a career as an executive for a check-printing firm in Chicago to join the restaurant business when family and friends raved about his homemade giardiniera.

“The millennials don’t remember that. This place [with ethnic food] kinda fits the valley.”

What’s next? Gregg Kander, a corporate and property attorney from Squirrel Hill, has big plans. He invested in Superior Motors when it ran into financial problems before opening and he is honoring his late wife’s passion for nonprofits by working on other projects in Braddock.

One involves remodeling the former Ohringer’s furniture store building at Seventh Street and Braddock Avenue — what Mr. Kander calls “the Empire State Bulding of Braddock” — into housing for 35 artists. Down the street at the former Levitt furniture store, he’s raising money to create studio space and programs for the artists.

“We need to create a village first,” Mr. Kander said. “I think artists will lead the way.”

Mr. Kander and Mr. Portogallo say they aren’t sold on the East Shore concept, but they’re pleased others are thinking about the future.

“East Shore? Surfing in Braddock?” Mr. Portogallo said. “I’m proud to call it the Mon Valley.”

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