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Harrisburg: The City's Silver Lining



A Guest Post by Alex Hartzler, President, WCI Partners

Harrisburg-bashing has become an all-too-familiar pattern recently with some folks in the local media. With the difficult fiscal challenges our city's leaders face, and the damage done by the great recession, it has become fashionable for people to point to the Capitol City as all the root of all central Pennsylvania evil.

It has to stop.

On Sunday, January 29th I read an [article in the *Harrisburg Patriot-News*](#) that was essentially a satirical look at what the incoming Corbett Administration Team will find in Harrisburg once they all arrive. And while I am sure the author was making a good-natured attempt at humor, the column struck the wrong tone, at least for me.

In it, I was surprised to see the author take a shot at Muench Street, telling her readers that it is a "place you don't want to go." I could not disagree more, and in fact, I go there every day. You see, our offices are there, and the economic development investments we have made in that corridor have been paying dividends for the city and its residents for quite some time.

Perhaps a bit of background is in order for not only the author, but for anyone who has not taken a stroll through our little slice of Harrisburg lately.

The Olde Uptown neighborhood is the area between Second and Third Streets, and Muench and Maclay Streets within the City of Harrisburg. The neighborhood was built in the late 19th century and served for many years as a

vibrant residential community. In 1972, the neighborhood was devastated by the flood from Tropical Storm Agnes and soon became plagued with vacant, blighted properties and rampant criminal activity.

In 2006, my company WCI Partners began renovating what is now over 90 historic homes in the neighborhood, as well constructing 16 new townhomes. To date, approximately two-thirds of the total properties have been completed and sold to owner-occupants and many others have been rented. All of the homes have been converted from multi-family properties to single-family dwellings.

Because the overall health and welfare of the city itself is always one of our top concerns, we made a number of comprehensive neighborhood improvements, including the installation of new sidewalks, street lights, street trees, and neighborhood banners. Since the project began, criminal activity has dropped dramatically, and the new residents have developed an active Neighborhood Association focused on beautification, safety, and community outreach.

And we are not prepared to stop there. There are still a number of vacant and blighted properties within the four block area bounded by Maclay and Muench Streets, and Second and Third Streets. WCI has identified over 30 properties that require substantial renovation and can be converted into single-family owner-occupied homes to further stabilize the area. We hope to be moving on that phase of our plan in very short order.

In short, from Mayor Steve Reed to Mayor Linda Thompson, we have never lost our faith in the City of Harrisburg. Indeed we think that the overall medium and long term national trends are very much in favor of cities, even our own Harrisburg. Whether it is our firm or friends like Greenworks Development, substantial investment is still being made to reclaim our streets and our neighborhoods. It is sometimes tough, and progress seems like it isn't moving fast enough. But one thing is for certain:

If we keep talking about "how bad" the city is, it will become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we keep sending out signals that Harrisburg is a bad place to be, potential homeowners, renters and yes, members of the Corbett team, will take notice and our efforts will be for naught.

In any case, I invite the Patriot-News staff and anyone else with an interest in our city to come and visit us, have lunch down the street at Alvaro's and see what we've done down on Muench Street and the surrounding neighborhood. I think they will be pleasantly surprised at what they see.

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