



Published on November 7, 2002

LET'S GET GROWING: WE NEED TO SELL OUR CITY.

Source: Carla Anderson, URBAN WARRIOR

■It's been 50 years since Philadelphians began an exodus so massive that the city is now a fragile shadow of its former self.

We've lost 554,000 people – more than a quarter of our population. Almost enough to fill the entire city of Boston.

These losses have pockmarked the city with ugly reminders of its boomtown past: Empty factories, crumbling row houses and rusting chain-link fences.

Worse, whole generations have grown up believing that true success means leaving the city. For these young people, moving out is no longer just a matter of fleeing the taxes, the trash and the schools. After years of watching friends and family leave, they now see a single-family house in the suburbs as the ultimate symbol of their success.

It's an attitude that could be the death of Philadelphia, and could permanently cripple the metro area. Worse yet, it seems permanent, even among our city leaders.

Top officials in the Street administration describe their job as that of managing decline. Street himself, who has focused on bulldozing entire neighborhoods of decrepit housing during his three years in office, has put zero effort into finding new buyers for homes that go vacant.

Not one person in this entire city has the job of trying to reverse the losses and bring in new residents.

I think it's time someone did.

Needed: Serious sales job

After 50 years, it's time to look beyond defeatist attitudes and strive for a new kind of growth. Because, despite all its problems, this city has turned cool.

Ten years after our current governor-elect – and then-mayor – Ed Rendell, put Philadelphia on the national map as a comeback city, his vision of a vibrant downtown has come to pass. Trendy shops line cobblestone streets, and the bars are full of beautiful people. This new energy brings new appreciation for the city's status in our nation's

history, its treasure trove of landmark architecture and the breathtaking quality of its public spaces.

As this renaissance expands into neighborhoods like South Philadelphia, Fairmount, Northern Liberties and University City, there's just no reason to settle for second-class status as a city on the shrink.

Just ask people like Keith and Kat Steidle, who recently defied the trend and traded their leafy home in the suburbs for a Center City row house.

“Where else can you live in a big Northeastern city and still afford a three-story house in a great neighborhood, and get a back yard, too?” they say.

Their enthusiasm – untainted by the generations of Philadelphia attitude – comes spilling out:

“You can walk just about everywhere...the people are friendly...you're an hour from the beach, an hour-and-a-half from the mountains, two hours from New York...”

Just about the only thing that bugs this couple is that outsiders still have no idea how much the city has changed.

“You have to live here to know,” said Kat, who has lived in several cities across the country. “We've had friends who came here as tourists and weren't that impressed, but when they came back and stayed with us, they couldn't believe how cool it actually is.”

Philadelphia is lucky to have people like the Steidles, accidental ambassadors who spread the news by word of mouth. This couple, for instance, has had more guests in one year at their Fidler Square home than they ever had in the five years they lived in Collingswood, NJ, and converted each one into a walking advertisement.

“People come here once and have fun, so they tell the rest of our friends, and then they want to come, too,” said Kat.

But I say we need more.

I say we need an organized marketing effort to attract residents. An effort that's not only organized, but well-funded and focused – and enjoys real support from city leaders both inside and outside of government.

Because while cities like Chicago and Boston grab all the glory that comes with new growth, Philadelphia has been selling itself short.

“We've done surveys that show most people, even those who live in the Northeastern United States, don't really know where Philadelphia is,” said Meryl Levitz, President and chief executive officer of the Greater Philadelphia Tourism Marketing Corp. “Many

people who have never been to Philadelphia have a vague idea about the Constitution being signed here, but other than that, their impression is that of a dark, dirty, and somewhat industrial-looking city.”

This just plain makes me mad.

I mean, I live here. This is my home. I want everyone to know how great it is.

And I think we can make that happen.

Levitz already spends \$10 million a year on highly successful campaigns that bring tourists to town. The Pennsylvania Convention Center regularly promotes Philadelphia to various conventioners. Greater Philadelphia First is planning an ambitious new campaign to attract businesses to the region. Peco Energy, with its long history of promoting the area to new employers, is launching an information-filled Web site that promotes the city.

The Pennsylvania Economy League just got a \$2 million state grant to attract and keep more college students. And the Center City District, with its proven track record for revitalization, is preparing a campaign that sells middle class homebuyers on six of the city’s “edge” neighborhoods.

Why not focus some of this effort on one organized campaign to attract new residents?

“That would be great,” said Levitz. “Repopulation is at the heart of what we’re all trying to do. It would help a lot if we got everybody into one room, on a quarterly basis, to share information and research. It’s just that nobody’s done it.”

Judy von Seldeneck, outgoing head of the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce and no slouch when it comes to good business sense, says she has no doubt such an effort can work.

“You be it can,” she said. “The fact is I don’t really think we’ve ever done a very good job of marketing. It’s been fragmented, scattered all over landscape. I think we ought to consolidate it all under one umbrella, leverage our resources and focus a serious campaign. We need to bring out our starting team, and make this a top priority.”

Harlem’s example

I’m not about to pretend that growing the city will be easy. Anyone who lives here knows that taxes are too high, too many schools still stink, and city services are stretched.

We also know that Philadelphia still suffers from crime, drugs, and racial tension – the very things that experts say sent people packing during the last 50 years, leaving block after block of unwanted real estate in their wake.

But we don't have to wait for all these problems to go away before we try to make the city grow. In fact, growth can help us solve them.

Consider Harlem. Crime, drugs and racial tension did as much damage there as they did here, in neighborhoods like Philadelphia's Kensington, Nicetown, or Mantua.

But in Harlem, brownstone shells with the roofs caved in – which would have sold for \$20,000 10 years ago – now are snapped up at auction for over half a million. White-collared professionals, black and white, are charging into blocks where crime and drugs have been conquered. Even Starbucks has moved in.

Why?

“It was pure market pressure,” said Peter Moody, a Harlem real-estate agent who grew up in the neighborhood and owns property there. “It really started when raw loft space in TriBeca started to exceed \$3 million. People had no choice but to look north, and cross that imaginary Mason-Dixon Line of 110th Street.”

Harlem's increased population of professional people now is contributing to a drop in crime, even in some of the most entrenched drug corners, Moody said.

Now, Philadelphia is not New York, and our story will definitely differ.

But clearly, the loss of people is not just a symptom of the city's problems. It's a problem all by itself. And Harlem shows that we don't have to wait for crime to drop or for schools to improve before we try to fix it.

Come on, Philadelphia. We were a boomtown once, and there's no reason we can't boom again.