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October 16-22, 2003

## CITYSPACE

### Penn's Pandering



**Crash Landing: Can't we do better with our waterfront?**

### Forcing a decision on waterfront development before the election is a huge mistake.

*by Steve Conn*

The results are in! And the winner is -- that, of course, remains to be seen. Let's review the matter of Penn's Landing quickly: Penn's Landing, perhaps the most stubborn 13 acres in the entire city, has defied developers' dreams for more than a generation. The latest Big Plan, you will recall, came to us courtesy of Mel Simon.

The Simon Group is the nation's leading developer of shopping malls. But to call their proposal to redevelop Penn's Landing simply a mall by the water is to not do it justice.

Shops!

Restaurants!

Entertainment venues!

This wasn't just a mall, it was "mall-o-tainment!"

'Nuf said.

Simon's scheme, you will also remember, mercifully died, collapsing under its own ponderous weight -- though not before Simon jerked and teased city officials who salivated over him like a high-school nerd who really thought he could date the head cheerleader.

Into the void left by Simon's retreat back to Indianapolis, however, stepped a group of genuine civic heroes. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and the University of Pennsylvania teamed up to sponsor a set of public discussions about the future of Penn's Landing. Imagine! Discussions before dealmaking, and held in public, not behind closed doors. This was a radical departure from the way business is usually done in this town.

These forums proved an astonishing success. Hundreds of people attended.

Those people argued with passion, and they deliberated thoughtfully.

And they hammered out seven large principles that ought to shape any new project for Penn's Landing. In summary, those seven are:

1. Make it distinctively Philadelphia; no cookie-cutter projects that could be anywhere.
2. It's the river, stupid; enhance the access to the waterfront.
3. Get the connections right; Penn's Landing can't float as an isolated 13-acre island.
4. Bolster Destination Philadelphia; this should appeal both to local and regional residents and to a wider tourist crowd.
5. Make it affordable and sustainable; the last thing we need is an overbuilt, overly ambitious project that becomes a white elephant.
6. Keep it public space; it belongs to all of us.
7. Use a public process. You could hear certain city officials grinding their teeth over this one.

It's hard to imagine a smarter set of guidelines for Penn's Landing than these, and city officials promised us that they were listening, that they would abide by these principles when they evaluated the latest round of proposals.



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s. The results are largely disappointing when graded against the

The centerpiece of the Keating plan is a huge Ferris wheel accented by a row of "Philly Phavorites" cheesesteak shops. Really.

More than that, Keating wants \$107 million in public subsidy *and* for the city to sell him the land. That way, presumably, when the Ferris wheel folds, he can do with it whatever he wants.

The only plan to seriously address the Forbidden Canyon of I-95 comes from the Atlantis project. This project would cap the highway and develop on top of the cap. Beyond that, the project is irredeemable -- garish, vulgar, overblown. If this monstrosity belongs anywhere on the planet, it might find a home in Las Vegas. And indeed the developers have said publicly that they wanted this project first in New York. It didn't work out there, and if it doesn't work here, they'll simply peddle it somewhere else.

By all means, go right ahead, but let's hope that, like its namesake, this project crashes into the sea.

Though the Tower Investments project is on a smaller scale than Atlantis, it manages to be about as bad. Rather than offer us anything distinctive, the project is a retreat of Harbor Place, gussied up with lots of kitschy "Victoriana" detailing. Further, this project seems willfully to have ignored making any connections between Penn's Landing and the rest of the city.

Founder's Square, from the Brandywine group, goes furthest to meet the principles articulated through the public process. It proposes to put a "sixth square" over I-95 at Market Street, making a real and symbolic connection with the city. And while this proposal may not create the gee-whiz, amusement-park spectacle of the others, it is elegant, humanely scaled and creates truly public spaces.

Regardless of what anyone might think about these designs, perhaps the most disturbing news about Penn's Landing is the Street administration's insistence on choosing one of these four before the election. There are obvious political points to be scored by doing so, but one can't help but fear that the long-term future of Penn's Landing will be sacrificed to John Street's short-term political gain.

Philadelphians demonstrated over the course of the public discussions about Penn's Landing not that they love Penn's Landing exactly, but that they want to love it. And they want Penn's Landing to be the start of a new love affair with our first river. Let's hope City Hall was really listening.

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