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The best Laid plans : Previous attempts to redesign the Delaware riverfront fizzled, but some say it's simply time to change course.

Photo By: Michael T. Regan

How Philadelphia can learn from past failures to develop a brighter future for the Delaware River.

by *Patrick M. Starr*

With the Penn's Landing debate in full rage, I thought it timely to remind everybody that Philly has more than 20 other miles of tidal riverfront -- all going a-begging. The lower Schuylkill (Art Museum to Naval Yard), lower Delaware (Penn's Landing to Naval Yard) and north Delaware (Penn's Landing to Bucks County) are each poised for massive transformation.

Philly is reconnecting with its long-neglected rivers. Our rivers were the reason for locating the city here, and for more than 200 years were our lifeblood and economic engine. The advent of the industrial revolution brought unprecedented pollution, which sullied and overwhelmed these immense natural resources. For years, the Delaware was so oxygen-depleted by pollution that for many miles it could not support fish. Not a pretty picture, so we turned our backs.

Fortunately, the Clean Water Act changed all of that, and 30 years later, like Americans everywhere, we are returning to our rivers in droves. We are so drawn to water in a primordial way -- the rhythmic slosh, the views, the breezes and even the smell (well, most of the time). And Philly is blessed with a truly *grand* river. The problem now is how to facilitate enjoyment of the river, how to pay for the public facilities and how to manage development.

The north Delaware riverfront, roughly 10 miles in length, was the subject of a major planning study led by the City Planning Commission. The political leadership of then-Congressman Robert Borski, Mayor John Street and Councilwoman Joan Krajewski made the study possible. The innovative "vision" created by the field operations team (James Corner, principal) and adopted as the official comprehensive plan of the area, included a few lessons from the Penn's Landing experience.

First, it's about the river. Recent commentary has focused on how the proposed mall at Penn's Landing would have turned inward, away from the river, and impeded access. What people want is the river.

Lesson: Keep the river's edge public, open and green. The north Delaware River plan calls for a continuous green ribbon (a greenway) at river's edge and pushes development back (from 50 yards to 200 yards or more). Nature will dominate, and getting right down to the water will be possible. Natural vegetation will be restored in places and river-related wildlife encouraged.

Second, access is key. I-95 is a problem along the entire riverfront, made worse along the north Delaware where there is a wide band of underutilized post-industrial land lying between 95 and the river.

Lesson: We must "mind the gap." New streets, new sidewalks and new connectors will have to be extended from the neighborhoods right down to the greenway and the river. Urban places thrive on connectivity and access. The plan proposes a river road that will meander (one narrow lane each way) along the greenway to allow for park/river vistas



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where new homes and businesses can be pulled right up to it. Trails

ng housing, supportive retail and space for civic functions.
dential developments at Penn's Landing are doing well -- Piers 3 and 5,
as well as nearby residential enclaves like North Front Street at Callowhill and around Gloria Dei Church.

Lesson: Demand for well-designed, newly constructed housing is strong, and the riverfront is a unique environment to provide it. The new riverfront neighborhoods could become regional neighborhoods of choice, retaining "buy-up" residents and drawing others back to the city. The value is intrinsic because they ain't making any new riverfront property. Philly's traditional rowhouses are too small, lack modern amenities, have no parking and no yards; they virtually *drive away* successful Philadelphians.

Fourth, allow for incremental development -- *chill out*. In fairness, some real development has happened at Penn's Landing. These have tended to be smaller ancillary projects from the Hyatt Hotel to Dockside to the Chart House and area nightclubs. It is the parcels "reserved" for the big mega-projects such as the World Trade Tower and Simon's shopping mall that lie fallow.

Lesson: Allow for incremental development over a period of time. On the north Delaware, there are many "bite-sized" parcels that, over time, can result in an ever-improving mix of residential, service-oriented retail and recreational uses. Even the recreational infrastructure will be staged, starting with the introduction of a new multipurpose trail on the former Kensington & Tacony railroad alignment (my organization, PEC, is making this happen). The public greenway is probably years away and will result only after parcels are assembled, remediated, subdivided and then *redeveloped*.

In fact, we know what needs to be done at Penn's Landing; we've shown that we do by adopting a reasonable plan for the north Delaware. The hard part now is *admitting* failure and changing course. The expectations for Penn's Landing must be more realistic, and the spin-off benefit of transforming the north Delaware needs to be recognized now.

Patrick M. Starr is the vice president of the Pennsylvania Environmental Council and a resident of Washington Square West.



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