

TOWN CENTER NEWS

Spring 2012

A quarterly newsletter on revitalization
and economic development in
Montgomery County's traditional towns



REUSING AND REDEVELOPING OLDER SHOPPING CENTERS



Many shopping centers have significant vacancies.

Here are five strategies that communities can consider when trying to avoid future retail vacancies.

1. Require Good Design of Shopping Centers

Poor design is not uncommon in shopping centers, with inaccessible parking, confusing driveways or pedestrian walkways, poor connections to local streets, unattractive building materials, or inadequate landscaping. It doesn't take much time for these shopping centers to show their age and ultimately, this drives customers elsewhere. Municipalities can – and should – require good design, both in new construction and during significant rehabilitations, to hopefully prevent the 'planned obsolescence' of these sites. The county's model general commercial ordinance, *Creating Commercial Areas with Character*, has standards that encourage better design.

2. Match Retail Zoning to Demand

Municipalities should carefully consider how much land is zoned for retail uses if site re-use is a priority – too much land zoned for commercial uses may only drive developers to use undeveloped land. Municipalities may also want to require an economic impact assessment to accompany any new large retail proposals.

3. Plan for Future Vacancies

Stores sometimes get built and abandoned within the span of a few years. To try to prevent retailers from leaving empty buildings behind, communities in other parts of the country have required developers of large retail buildings and shopping centers to put money into an escrow account that would cover the costs of marketing, rehabilitation or demolition if a store does become vacant. Landlords can also be encouraged to not allow tenants to let stores go dark. When tenants abandon retail spaces for new sites while continuing to control the lease, this prevents the landlord from finding a new tenant.

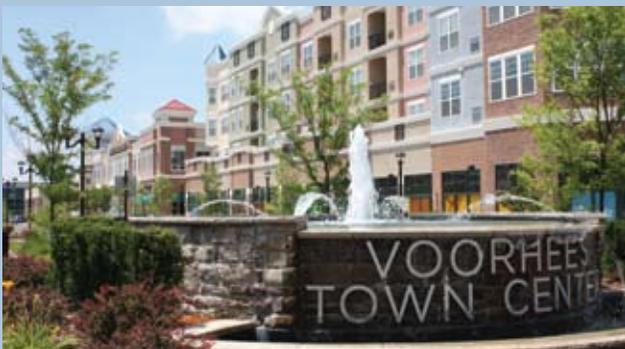
Montgomery County has an abundance of places to shop. From luxury retailers to bargain finds, the county has a vibrant retail sector drawing shoppers from across the region. However, as national retailers have tightened their belts over the last few years, many shopping centers are left with a noticeable number of vacant anchor tenants. The loss of an anchor tenant – be it a supermarket, clothing store, or bookshop – not only leaves empty spaces to be filled but cuts down on the number of people visiting a shopping center, making it harder for smaller shops to stay afloat.

Mashpee Commons is a successful shopping center redevelopment in Massachusetts.



**For additional information, contact the Montgomery County Planning Commission at 610-278-3723
or visit www.planning.montcopa.org**

Voorhees Town Center in New Jersey is a partial redevelopment of an old mall.



4. Allow Alternative Uses in Retail Buildings

The recent downturn in the economy has forced landlords to think outside of the box. Vacant retail spaces can be used for more than just retail – potential tenants include government offices, fitness centers, skate parks or similar recreational spaces, libraries or schools. At the Harrisburg East Mall (in Harrisburg, PA), the Broadway Classics Theater fills the space of a former Boscov’s. And in New Orleans, the Southern Food and Beverage Museum currently fills space in The Riverwalk, a downtown shopping center along the Mississippi River.

5. Encourage Mixed-Use Development in Defunct Centers

If larger shopping center sites no longer work as major retail destinations, consider rethinking the character of the site. Mixed use development can provide a transition from commercial areas to nearby residential areas and create a sense of place where it may have been lacking.

Mashpee Commons, on Massachusetts’ Cape Cod, was a defunct shopping center that was transformed into a thriving Main Street commercial area with retail, office, and residential uses. Similar ideas have been implemented locally in New Jersey at the Voorhees Town Center, among other places.

The county planning commission has two model ordinances that require mixed use. One, the new town mixed use district, focuses on walkable, compact developments while the other, the village mixed use district, emphasizes smaller-scale village-style development.

If shopping center vacancies are an issue in your community, we’d like to hear from you! We’d be glad to talk with you about zoning and design options for these places. Please contact Brian O’Leary at boleary@montcopa.org for more information.

HERITAGE TOWNS & TOURS GRANT PROGRAM

Grant money is available for communities in the Schuylkill River Heritage Area that want to better connect their downtown commercial areas and existing resources with regional trail users in this historic river valley. The Schuylkill River Heritage Towns and Tours Program aims to assist communities with strategies that bring positive economic impact to towns along many of our regional trails while enhancing the experience of trail users. There are three program initiatives:

- Creating an identity and a sense of place
- Improving and creating on the ground connections between trails and communities
- Destination creation and marketing

You must act quickly as the 2012 funding **deadline for applications is May 15**. There are two types of grants available, one for creating a Heritage Action Plan and the other for Implementation Projects. A plan must be created before applying for Implementation Projects. The program is open to many communities beyond just the banks of the Schuylkill River, including municipalities along the Perkiomen Trail. Last year, five communities received grants including Pottstown for its wayfinding and marketing initiative to bring trail users into the downtown.

Go to www.schuylkillriver.org/Heritage_Towns_Tours.aspx for more information and application forms

 **check-out what’s happening!**

There are lots of positive changes happening at Norristown’s Arts Hill. The Centre Theater, home of the Montgomery County Cultural Center, recently installed a brand new marquee. Figuring out which new production to see has never been easier! Just up the way, check out the new landscaping at the intersection of Main and Dekalb Streets as well as the new home for Theatre Horizon another block up Dekalb Street. Theatre Horizon plans to debut its new 120-seat theater in the fall of this year.

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New Home in Norristown
In 2008, Theatre Horizon put down roots in Norristown and became the flagship of Arts Hill, Norristown’s new arts district. Centrally located at 401 DeKalb Street, Theatre Horizon is in the heart of Montgomery County, just minutes from major highways and easily accessible via public transportation.

Box Office & Lobby
Our open-format, multi-use lobby space will be used for artistic, audience engagement and educational programs, such as summer camps and the pioneering Action Drama Program.

New Tech Shop
The dedicated tech shop will give Theatre Horizon’s production artists the tools to pursue excellence, and provide training opportunities for students of local theater.

