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## Youngstown Embraces Its Future

What happens when town and gown get together.

*By Thomas A. Finnerty, Jr.*

Some would say that Youngstown, Ohio, is finally starting to rise from the ashes, but it is more a case of rediscovering its pride.

After years of population loss and economic devastation, the city is trying to shake off the depression of the last three decades and build a sustainable future.

Youngstown's lifeblood never stopped flowing; it simply went underground or left town temporarily. Over the past 30 years, the city became a caricature of its press clippings and ignored its strengths. But now through the city's planning process, Youngstown 2010, it is beginning to capitalize on a recent upsurge of community pride from people both inside and outside the city limits.

### Been down so long

More than 25 years ago, *Planning* magazine featured an article about Youngstown's economic collapse ("Youngstown: Can This Steel City Forge a Comeback?" January 1978). The final paragraph of that article illustrated how completely unprepared for economic decline the community was. "It will be at least six months before the politics of handling the decline are resolved."



Six months turned into 22 years. During that time, things went from bad to worse. The city's population declined from 116,000 in 1980 to 82,000 in 2000. More than 50,000 manufacturing jobs disappeared from the Mahoning Valley region. But despite many steel mill and ancillary business closings, times weren't entirely bleak. Youngstowners are nothing if not resilient.

Pride was evident in many areas, even during the dark ages. There was the creation of Mill Creek MetroParks, converting the city park system, funded solely by city property taxes, into a true countywide system. There was the Butler Institute of American Art, designed by McKim, Mead, and White, built in 1919, and last expanded in 1987. There was the Youngstown Symphony and Powers Auditorium, originally a Warner Brothers theater built in 1931, later restored, and currently expanding again.

There was successful brownfields development along the length of the Mahoning River and on the former blast furnace slag dumps on the city's West Side. There were many high school state sports championships, allowing neighborhoods, cities, and suburbs to put aside their traditional differences and give united support to the winners.

There was a list of championship boxers, including Ray Mancini and Henry Arroyo. There were athletes and actors: Bernie Kosar, Ed O'Neil, Ron Jaworski, Paul McFadden, Jeff Wilkins, and Jim Tressel, all hometown guys. And there was Youngstown State University, whose four NCAA Division 1A national football championships brought the city positive press coverage.

This period also witnessed the ferreting out of corruption throughout Mahoning County. Judges, the county engineer, the county prosecutor, and various other elected and appointed officials were convicted of corruption-related crimes and jailed.

Then there was the rise and fall of Congressman James A. Traficant, Jr. Many residents and officials view the indictment, conviction, and imprisonment of the flamboyant legislator as a turning point for the community. It offered an opportunity to focus on new beginnings.

The current effort to restore pride to the community, instead of attaching it to individuals or institutions, began in the mid-1990s as city and university officials realized the status quo was only going to lead to further decline, and that the future of both institutions was in doubt. The demise of one would lead eventually to the demise of the other.

City-university relations had a history of mutual apathy. Downtown Youngstown and the campus were oriented back-to-back, with a ridge and a two-block, no-man's land between them. There was no attempt to link, as both entities looked inward. This relationship was marginally tolerable during good times, but when the economy collapsed, the city suffered, and as part of the city, the university suffered, too.

However, hard times can *eventually* force entities to look beyond their fortress walls and discover that cooperation may be the only means to a viable future.

### **New times, new attitudes**

Timing, they say, is everything. By the late 1990s, the city and the university independently decided their respective comprehensive plans needed to be modernized. The city of Youngstown's last comprehensive plan was completed in 1951. The plan was updated in 1974, but both of versions of the plan envisioned a vibrant steel economy. Following the 1974 update, the poor local economy left Youngstown without a road map.



Youngstown State University produced plans at regular intervals, perhaps because Ohio requires this from its academic institutions, though not from local governments. The university's last plan, done in 1994, reflected the university's transition from a purely commuter-based institution to a more residential campus. Dorms were built, facilities improved, but the surrounding neighborhoods were left alone to face what

was generally a slow road to oblivion. This road was markedly steeper along the campus fringe, where future intentions were not well defined.

Some community efforts took on a life of their own outside of an overall planning process. A few neighborhoods unilaterally dug their hands into the dirt in an effort to stop the slide. In 2000, Youngstown State University and a collection of neighborhood partners, on the fourth attempt, received a HUD Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) grant designed to help stabilize the Wick Park neighborhood to the north of the campus.

The university joined with several of its institutional partners along Wick Avenue to form the Wick Neighbors, a group seeking to redevelop Smoky Hollow, a traditional ethnic entry point that had been almost totally obliterated while waiting for YSU to decide where it was going. The Youngstown Metropolitan Housing Authority, trying to build on the momentum of the other neighborhood organizations, applied for a HUD Hope VI grant to tear down and revitalize the old Westlake Terrace public housing complex. HUD awarded a \$19.75 million grant to the housing authority in April 2003.

City officials attending various meetings began to notice that cities benefiting by economic recovery had actually planned for it. Councilmen came back from Chattanooga convinced that Youngstown would stop its decline only if it dealt with its current reality and developed a plan to cope with it. By 2001 Mayor George McKelvey and the entire city council had developed a collective will to move forward and had allocated \$300,000 for the process.

That year, Community Development Director Jay Williams set aside a sizable portion of his agency's budget for the initial planning process, and he continues to apportion about \$75,000 annually so that the plan will be a living document. Planning Director Bill D'Avignon and Chief Planner Anthony Kobak became the cheerleaders for and caretakers of the Youngstown 2010 process.

### **Looking around**

In 2000, the university administration had changed, and new leadership under president David Sweet set in motion plans to connect the university's future with the city's future. The university realized it was hard to sell on-campus residency if nearby neighborhoods were in a state of disrepair. Eventually both the city and the university decided that participation in each other's planning process was essential to the success of both.



Youngstown sent out RFPs for Phase 1 of its comprehensive plan, the vision. YSU was conducting its own visioning process, and sent out RFPs for its plan update. As a first step in building collaboration, YSU's Center for Urban and Regional Studies had a staff member on both search committees. In late 2001, the city chose Urban Strategies, Inc., of Toronto, to facilitate the visioning process. David Sweet delayed choosing a planning consultant so the university could fully participate in the city's visioning process.

"The Canadians," as the Urban Strategies team became affectionately known, consisted of partners George Dark and Frank Lewinberg, project manager and associate Pino Di Mascio, planner Oliver Jerschow, and urban designer

Eric Turcotte. Once again fortune intervened, as Hunter Morrison, Cleveland's long-serving planning director, became available; his wife, Jane Campbell, was elected mayor of Cleveland in November 2001.

David Sweet, who had worked with Morrison in Cleveland when Sweet was dean of the Levin College of Urban Affairs at Cleveland State University, took advantage of this opportunity, and Morrison filled the vacant director's position at YSU's Center for Urban and Regional Studies. As one of the prime architects of the 2000 Cleveland Civic Vision planning process, Morrison was a catch for both Youngstown and the university. The city contracted for part of Morrison's time and simultaneously acquired the experience of Urban Strategies, as well as the expertise of YSU's center.

Urban Strategies began the visioning process in June 2002 by doing a reconnaissance of Youngstown, guided by city and YSU staff members. Reconnaissance was followed by meetings with prominent officials and groups, held at YSU. This was followed by a series of focus groups, also held at YSU, and at this point it started to become apparent that something special was taking place.

The level of concern, hope, and intensity expressed at the focus groups was palpable. Focus group revelations were distilled by Urban Strategies into a vision. The vision was previewed to "make sure we have it right"; it was edited and readied for the community unveiling.

Stambaugh Auditorium is a large neo-classical vestige of Youngstown's past, one of the many residual structures, as George Dark repeatedly pointed out, that a city of Youngstown's current size could never have built, and one that its suburbs could not afford to duplicate. This 2,000-seat edifice, a gift to the community from steel barons in 1929, was chosen for the vision's public debut in December 2002.

Public meetings concerning planning in Youngstown have never been well attended. Hunter Morrison also noted that at the height of the planning process for Cleveland, there were never more than 500 people in attendance. A jaded local TV reporter stated before the presentation that he didn't anticipate anything special, perhaps "200 people, if they're lucky."

But the stars aligned, and on a cold night last December, nine days before Christmas, 1,400 people from Youngstown and the Mahoning Valley came out to Stambaugh Auditorium to make sure Urban Strategies got it right.

#### **Four platforms**

What Urban Strategies got right were the four platforms that were the base of the vision: accepting Youngstown as a smallish community, defining Youngstown's role in the new regional economy, improving Youngstown's image and enhancing the quality of life, and a call to action. Each platform came with a subset of related issues.

Presidents, mayors, and planners spoke, Urban Strategies presented its materials, and then came the call to action. With the intensity and zeal of Henry V on the feast of St. Crispian, Youngstown Community Development Agency Director Jay Williams charged the crowd to take this vision, their vision, to take this city, their city, and to take this region, their Mahoning Valley, wrench it from its malaise, capture the electricity of the night, and move on to an inclusive and sustainable future.

Comments left by attendees after the presentation were a mixture of enthusiastic support for vision and the plan that would ensue, specific suggestions about what the plan should include, and complaints about taxes and the region's political system. Overall, the responses were positive, and more than 100 attendees volunteered to participate in the planning process as it unfolded.

A Youngstown 2010 web page was created to keep the public informed about the planning process. As of May 31, 2003, about 3,400 people had visited the site.

#### **Next steps**

As part of Urban Strategies's charge, the firm was to suggest steps to be taken following completion of the visioning process. It was essential not to let the momentum slip away. Urban Strategies first recommended that the city demonstrate its commitment to the process. This commitment became official on February 19, 2003 when the Youngstown city council adopted the vision by resolution.

Other recommendations were enacted as well. A technical committee consisting of city planning and YSU Urban and Regional Studies staff was established to oversee the creation of a steering committee, comprised of citizens who had volunteered during the visioning process. The working groups for each of the vision's four platforms

have been organized.

Keeping the vision and planning process in the public consciousness has also been a primary focus during the past few months. Youngstown State University, with Kent State University and the University of Akron, are members of a consortium that owns and operates WNEO, the public television station for Northeast Ohio. This station rebroadcast the vision presentation, and gave the first of what will be quarterly updates on the successes of the planning process.

This program was moderated by a local news anchor, and the panel consisted of YSU president David Sweet, Hunter Morrison, Mayor George McKelvey, planning director Bill D'Avignon, and chief planner Anthony Kobak. Included were updates on what has happened in the process since the initial presentation, as well as a list of current projects, such as the YSU student housing that has come to fruition in Smoky Hollow — a project independent of Youngstown 2010, but fitting with Vision 2010.

The vision is established and the actual planning process is gearing up. Youngstown is positioning itself to fit in the new regional economic reality.

Neighborhood planning is on the agenda for the last half of 2003 and the following three years. Because the university is now undertaking its master plan, the downtown will be the first neighborhood studied. The City-University Joint Commission, a group formed to ease relationships between the two entities, will oversee the joint planning process. The city's planning director sits on the university planning committee, and several university employees are part of the city's planning team.

Things have been looking up downtown as well. Positive legacies of the Traficant era are two new downtown federal courthouses, one with an award-winning design by Robert Stern. The former congressman also secured a \$26 million HUD grant to build a downtown convocation center, now in the planning stage.

The state has recently provided matching funds to redesign and open through traffic on Federal Plaza, a pedestrian mall built on top of Federal Street, the downtown's main street, during the 1960s. Finally, the university's Dana School of Music, in partnership with the Youngstown Symphony, plans to build a new recital hall next to Powers Auditorium.

Youngstown's unique collaborative planning process is already bearing fruit in the form of partnerships and points to a promising — if challenging — future for this old mill town.

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## Resources

**Images:** Top — The Museum of Labor and Industry, designed by architect Michael Graves, houses relics of Youngstown's past as a steel town. Middle — The Nathaniel Jones Federal Court House, designed by architect Robert A.M. Stern. Bottom — The renovated B&O railroad station, on the Mahoning River, is now home to the Ohio Brewing Company and Restaurant. Photos by Tom Finnerty.

The city's Vision 2010 page is at [www.youngstown2010.com](http://www.youngstown2010.com). The PowerPoint presentation of Vision 2010 is available there as a PDF.

E-mail comments on the vision and the planning process to [youngstown2010@cityofyoungstownoh.com](mailto:youngstown2010@cityofyoungstownoh.com).

The Butler Institute of American Art is at [www.butlerart.com](http://www.butlerart.com).

For more on the Power Auditorium, see [www.youngstownsymphony.com](http://www.youngstownsymphony.com).

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