

EQUITABLE TRANSIT-ORIENTED DEVELOPMENT

A Proposal for Pottstown, Pa.



URBAN CONSULTANCY PROJECT

Twila J. Fisher
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Never believe that a few caring people can't change the world. For, indeed, that's all who ever have.

Margaret Mead

Executive Summary

In Pottstown, everything has a story. Anyone who has lived there any length of time knows that, and they likely now have their own.

This project matters for its own reasons, but the people it represents matter more. Embedded in these pages is a cry for equity, cultural diversity, history, and honor – for eyes that see another, ears that hear, and hearts that seek to understand. It is easy to get jaded by politics, government, and the rapid growth that comes from “building things,” like Robert Moses’s controversial infrastructure buildouts in New York City from the 1930s to the 1960s (NYPAP). It is also rewarding to bask in the glory of a “job well done” – that new bridge, those LED lights, or the high-rise apartment complex with 20% affordable housing. Rightfully so, because these improvements are part of the built environment, and that *does* change things. But, for whom? This project seeks to embrace both the buildout of public services and the people of Pottstown who deserve to access and enjoy it most -- the same people that are the most likely to be sidelined if equity considerations are not taken seriously.

In anticipation of the long-awaited return of passenger rail to Pottstown, a post-industrial town 40 miles west of Philadelphia (Google maps), this consultancy report examines the feasibility of Equitable Transit-Oriented Development (ETOD) as an economic development instrument to accelerate change while considering those who live there. The report was prepared for the Pottstown Area Health and Wellness Foundation (PAHWF), who is supporting the Borough of Pottstown in advancing the rail project. In answer to the three consultancy questions posed in the “Introduction,” this report offers **six key observations and 33 recommendations** that optimistically support ETOD implementation in Pottstown, even when the reinstatement of passenger rail is likely five-to-ten years away from being realized.

The key observations proposed here undergird many other studies that Pottstown has been fortunate to receive over the past 40-50 years. For a town of approximately 22,000 people in a five-mile area (U.S. Census) that is said at times to have felt like Montgomery County’s “forgotten stepchild,” it has received its fair share of attention from notable organizations, including the Urban Land Institute. Taking these studies into consideration, this report presents the following key observations that lend themselves to an *equity lens*, which is the most important ETOD factor:

1. Adequate partnerships
2. Funding and revenue streams
3. Connected transit opportunities
4. Workforce development and education
5. Affordable housing possibilities
6. Equitable community representation

The report lists several recommendations after each key observation. They are offered to PAHWF and the Borough of Pottstown as actions steps to reconsider -- if they were mentioned in previous studies (see list in Exhibit 1) -- and evaluate for future implementation.

Notably, in the summer of 2023, New York Times bestselling author James McBride published *The Heaven and Earth Grocery Store* (McBride, 2024), set nowhere else but in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. Although McBride is not the first person to write about Pottstown, since the book’s release, many residents have gathered in book clubs, coffee shops, and friend groups to pick apart the characters and places within, delighted that a renowned author put their beloved hometown on the map in a new way. They hope it is just the beginning, and that there will soon be a train stop on the map, too.

Introduction

There are several themes to consider as context when reading this report. They are mentioned briefly here and explained in more detail throughout. First, the **history of Pottstown** and its location along a rail line adjacent to the Schuylkill River. Second, intrinsic to the first and as previously mentioned, **the people of Pottstown**. Third, the long-awaited and now-plausible notion of Amtrak **reinstating passenger rail** along a 65-mile stretch between the City of Reading and Philadelphia, with proposed stops in Pottstown and Phoenixville (SRPRA, 2024). Fourth, the **Pottstown Health and Wellness Foundation (PAHWF)**, who serves as an anchor and convenor for many key projects in town, and who helped finance some of the previous ULI studies (Brown, 2024). Additionally, in 2023 they conducted a valuable Pottstown Community Survey that helped inform this report. They are also the host organization for this project. Fifth, and prominent as the subject of this report, an understanding of **Equitable Transit-Oriented Development (ETOD)** and the feasibility of using it to spur revitalization around the historic train station downtown. ETOD must include buy-in and participation from the residents who give Pottstown its spunk and endearment. If they are not successfully woven into future development, it could become a town on life support – still with a heartbeat but void of substance. For a town steeped in vibrant history, that would perhaps be the worst disservice one could do. However, with the right voices, ETOD can be effective and sustainable while preserving the town’s culture.

History of Pottstown

Pottstown’s humble origins date back to 1752, when local ironmaster John Potts purchased 972 acres of land from John Penn, son of William Penn. First named “Pottsgrove” after the family name, it became known over time as Pottstown, presumably due to an increase in population. In 1815, it formally incorporated as a borough (Borough of Pottstown website, 2024). Like other post-industrial towns, Pottstown has known feast and famine. From the late 1800s to the mid 1900s, the town prospered immensely through iron and steel production. It is perhaps still most famously known for contributing to significant steel buildouts across the nation, like pieces of the locks in the Panama Canal, a large part of the Golden Gate bridge in California, sections of the George Washington and Verazzano Narrows bridges in New York, and the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel in Virginia (Snyder, 2017). Pottstown was also a stop on the Reading Railroad, a passenger rail line that ran from Philadelphia to Pottsville (Lykens Valley website). Then, steel production rapidly declined nationwide, forcing the Bethlehem Steel plant in Pottstown to close its doors in 1975, followed by Firestone Tire & Rubber Co. in 1980 and many other businesses (Hylton, 2010). One year later, the Reading Railroad made its final passenger train run through Pottstown on June 30, 1981 (GoReadingBerks, 2020). By the turn of the century, industry had all but evaporated, leaving behind swaths of empty warehouses and storefronts. The Borough reeled under full-on rust belt decline. Yet, more than 40 years later, many lifelong residents are still there, refusing to lose hope. One may find them sitting in a smoke-filled bar (there are still a few) or social clubs, talking of the good old days and pining about the town’s woes. But they stay. They stay because they are pieced into the town’s fabric and because they are proud part of the story, and that is what makes them important voices at any decision-making table as the town continues its revitalization journey.

Host organization and consultancy questions

The Pottstown Area Health and Wellness Foundation (PAHWF) was founded in 2003 when the Pottstown Memorial Medical Center privatized, allocating a significant portion of the proceeds for the community (PAHWF, “About Us”). With a core mission of strengthening “the health and wellness of area residents, providing education, funding, and programs that provide equitable access and opportunities for all residents to adopt healthy lifestyles,” PAHWF uses these funds judiciously to serve residents in the Borough of Pottstown and a 10-mile radius (PAHWF, “Mission”). Since they are a key community partner for Borough implementation of a recently awarded federal “Thriving Communities” grant, they were a

logical host for this consultancy. Additionally, one of the Thriving Communities planning areas is evaluating the feasibility of ETOD for the geographic area around the former train station. This project contributes local research to that planning and seeks to inform the consultants as they consider ETOD implications and passenger rail reinstatement. Accordingly, the observations and recommendations in this report aim to answer **three consultancy questions**:

1. Do adequate financial and partner supports exist for ETOD?
2. What inclusion efforts are essential to minimize displacement of residents as ETOD develops?
3. What equity outcomes will serve as benchmarks for ETOD success?

Research methodology

The **primary research** methodologies used in this paper include case studies, a longitudinal review of four Pottstown studies performed by the Urban Land Institute (ULI) in 1976, 1989, 2009, and 2019 (ULI 1989 and 2019 Reports), structured interviews with individuals from Pottstown, and desk research from dozens of online articles and papers. Two online surveys were used: one to the non-profit and public entities comprising a Pottstown Delegation that is focused on equitable transit, and a community survey distributed to 650 people at The Hill School, a co-educational boarding school in town. Participatory research was employed with 23 high school students to conduct and design a sustainability challenge that involved community mapping, green space design, and sustainable transit solutions. **Secondary research** methods using primary sources included peer-reviewed articles, books and reports, U.S. Census Bureau statistics, and development data.

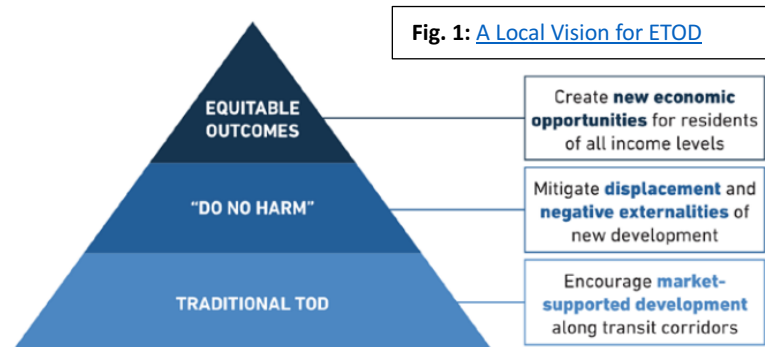
Limitations

There are several limitations to the research application. First, the Borough of Pottstown is much smaller in size compared to the case study cities. Accordingly, applying what can be learned from larger ETOD projects feels limited in terms of scope, funding, and scale. Second, ETOD is frequently used around already-existing passenger rail. In this case, Pottstown would begin implementing ETOD based on the *hope* that passenger rail will be reinstated in the next five-to-seven years. This reverse-engineering could be counterproductive if things do not go as planned. Additionally, this project assumes that the historic train station downtown will be restored and actively used for passenger rail service. If it is not, many of the recommendations here will not apply. Third, this paper posits that one of the biggest missing factors in prior economic efforts has been the lack of community voices at the table. However, to date, significant and critical community input has yet to be gathered, and it is possible that residents are not as eager to get involved as this report assumes. Successful ETOD relies on community voices. Fourth, the word limit for this report required omitting some research and policy pieces that would have made it more robust. Lastly, successful implementation of some projects recommended in this paper depend in large part on receiving federal and state transportation grants that are available for a limited time.

Why ETOD?

If a town cares about honoring its history and people, it should also care about the impact (good and bad) of rapid economic development. This includes understanding money sources, partnerships, and decision-making processes. Goal-oriented managers know it is easier to complete projects with as few hands in the pot as possible. Equity-focused managers encourage lots of hands in the pot and accept that it will not be a quick or easy process. Traditional Transit-Oriented Development (TOD), further explained below, has tended to act like the goal-oriented manager. Now, after decades of well-implemented TOD projects in urban centers across the globe, city leaders and urban planners have observed rich cultural identities disappear due to widespread displacement in TOD areas. In response, some now embrace acting more like “fair” managers even if it prolongs the process, and in those cases, ETOD planning is gaining popularity as a design strategy for transit hubs.

Simply explained, TOD is “urban development that harnesses public investment in transit infrastructure to leverage private development, usually with a mix of uses and amenities, within walking distance to bus stops or train stations (Griffith, 2017). **ETOD** assumes an “equitable outcomes” approach (Fig. 1), that makes space for community voices alongside local officials, developers, transit partners, funders, business owners, and nonprofit agencies, especially in the early planning processes (All-in-Cities, 2022).



As Pottstown anticipates accelerated revitalization with the return of passenger rail, an intentional commitment to ETOD measures would start shifting power from the hands of the few and bring essential voices to the decision-making table, potentially avoiding widespread displacement of the residents living around the train station and ensuring future affordable housing options.

ETOD case studies

Desk research for this project highlighted three recent examples of ETOD in the U.S., with some of their important initiatives noted in Table 1 below.

Table 1: ETOD Initiatives in Three Cities

Chicago, Illinois (Chicago.gov, 2024)	Atlanta, Georgia (LIIF, 2020)	Austin, Texas (CapMetro, 2024)
Equitable Transit-Oriented Plan draft (2020) after 18-month rigorous community review of plan w/ 70 stakeholders)	Mayor unveils \$15B plan to address affordable housing crisis (2020)	City of Austin and CapMetro partner to form Austin Transit Partnership (2023)
Plan adopted by Chicago Plan Commission (2021) and Connected Communities ordinance passed (2022)	Invest Atlanta (redevelopment authority) launched a \$15M ETOD fund from multiple streams	Cap Metro awarded \$3.1 million from the FTA for ETOD study
Elevate Chicago (cross-sector collaborative) designated to ensure implementation of ETOD Plan (ongoing)	Offers predevelopment funding for affordable housing efforts near transit	Study prioritizes equity, underrepresented voices, and unifying transit and housing efforts across multiple agencies
Pre-development and new development grants offered as ETOD incentives (current)	Established the TransFormation Alliance (TFA) to advocate, educate and provide technical assistance for those impacted by transit development.	City releases ETOD development study for “Project Connect” (ongoing) with six community-informed equity goals

ETOD in Pottstown

To propose a focus area for ETOD in Pottstown, this report applies the classic half-mile radius -- an industry standard for TODs and what most people can cover on foot in ten minutes (Architecture 2030, n.d.). Of note, as seen in Fig. 2, a half-mile radius bumps ETOD outside of Pottstown proper into South Pottstown, another township in another county. This option should not be discounted, as it presents an interesting opportunity for intergovernmental collaboration. Another option would be applying the 180-degree TOD model (Fig. 3), allowing the river to hold the boundary while still including dense residential housing on the north/northeast areas near the station.

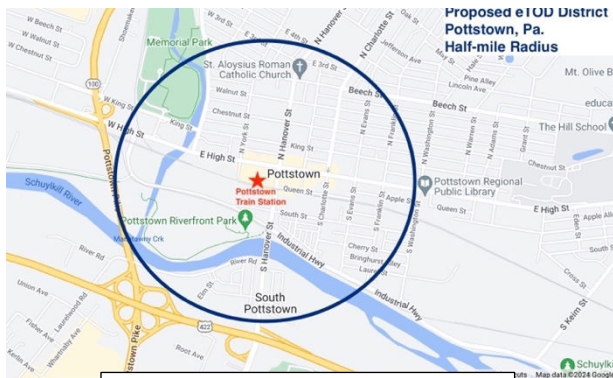
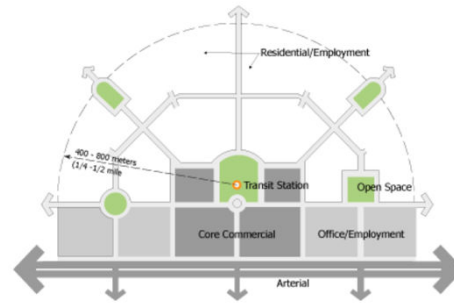


Fig. 2: Proposed half-mile ETOD area



Adapted from *The Next American Metropolis: Ecology, Community, and The American Dream*. Peter Calhorne.

Fig. 3: Possible 180-degree model

For purposes of the study, we keep the traditional half-mile radius but maintain focus north of the river, where some of the most underserved populations in Pottstown reside. Figs. 4, 5, and 6, derived from different data platforms, powerfully underscore the need for ETOD so as to minimize displacement.

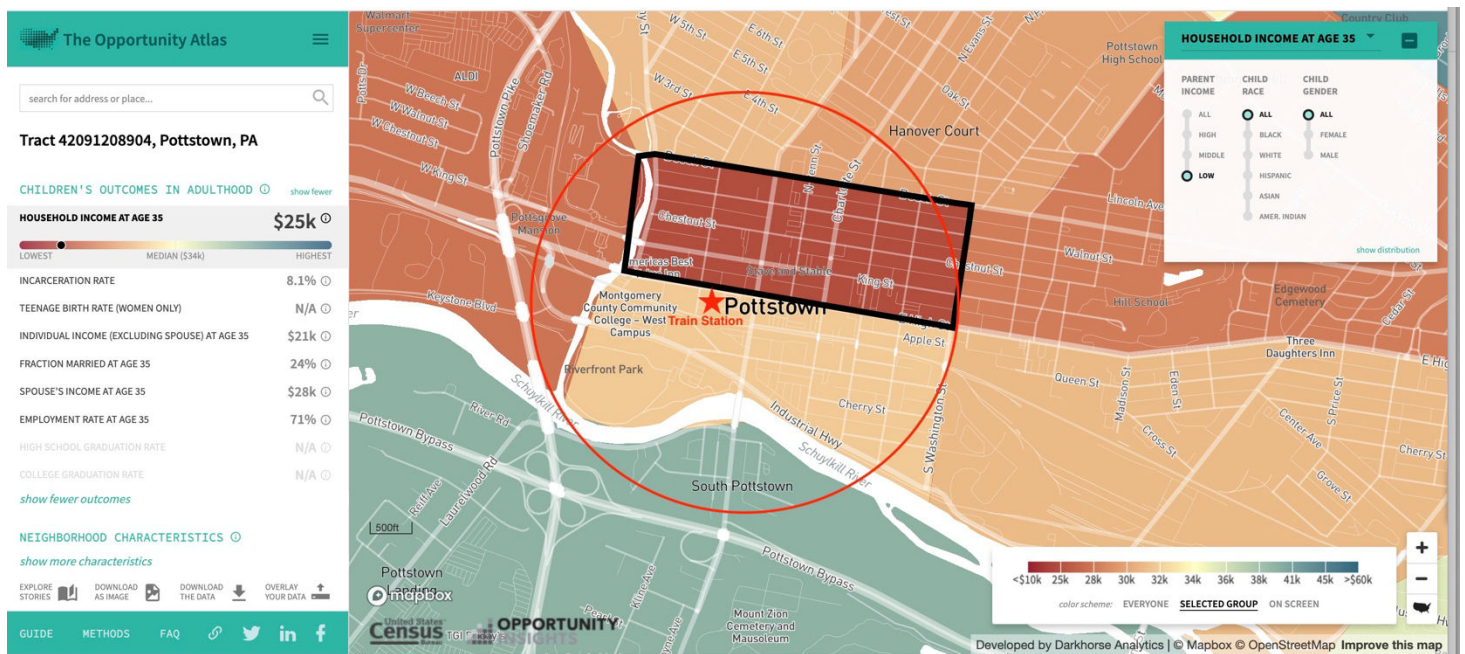


Fig. 4: Household income \$25k or less

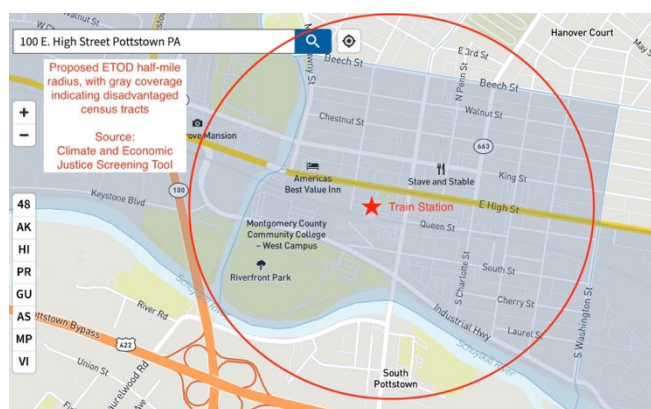
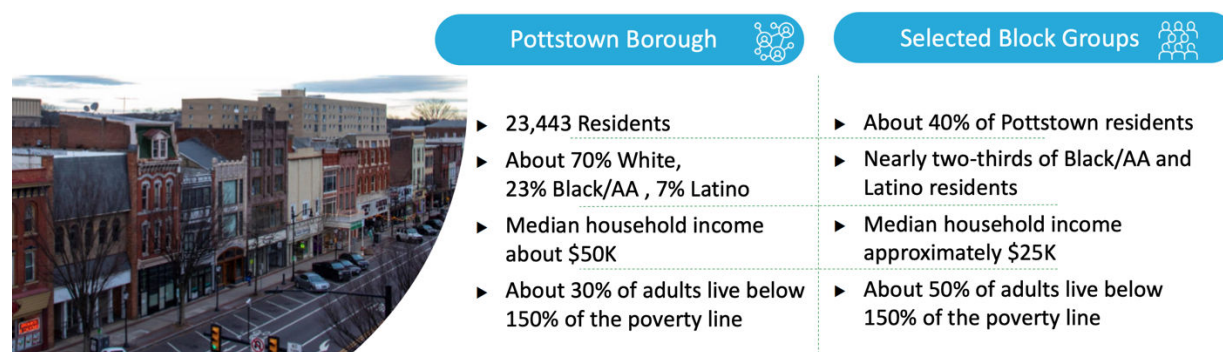


Fig. 5: Disadvantaged census tracts in ETOD area



Fig. 6: Racial minority classification in ETOD area

In another example, two groups from “Selected Block Groups” (Fig. 7) are in the proposed ETOD area. When compared to data from all of Pottstown Borough (left column), the disparity is startling.

Fig. 7: [2023 PAHWF Pottstown Community Survey](#)

Key Observations and Actionable Items

Through the following key observations and recommendations, this report aims to answer the three consultancy questions by evaluating what exists in Pottstown, and what could be added. Each contribute to implementing a local ETOD framework.

1. Adequate partnerships
2. Funding and revenue streams
3. Connected transit opportunities
4. Workforce development and education
5. Affordable housing possibilities
6. Equitable community representation

The first two sections address the first consultancy question about adequate financial and partner supports for ETOD. The final four sections serve as ETOD benchmarks of success, which aim to answer the second and third consultancy questions about inclusion efforts to minimize displacement, and ways to measure equity outcomes.

1. Adequate partnerships

Strong public/private partnerships are vital to ETOD success. While they did not always exist in the Pottstown region, when the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law passed by President Biden in 2021 allocated \$66 billion for rail (The White House, 2021), it revived old conversations and aspirations in the private and public sectors about restoring rail service over a three-county region along the Schuylkill River. With these increased funding opportunities and renewed partnership commitments, the Schuylkill River Passenger Rail Authority (SRPRA) formed in 2022 (SRPRA.com, 2024). Then, when SRPRA was accepted



into the Federal Transportation Administration's (FTA) Corridor Identification and Development Program in 2023, the dream took a huge step toward becoming a reality. SRPRA also received \$500,000 to cover environmental and engineering services, planning guidance, and

computer simulations of train service in the region, which will likely lead to more federal funding (Martinez, 2023). Regionally, the Montgomery County Planning Commission (MCPC) has allocated ongoing resources to the project,¹ and the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC) is rolling out an FY2025 Unified Planning Work Program (UPWP) that includes a Pottstown station vision and equitable transit planning (UPWP Draft, 7). Locally, the Borough of Pottstown was the recipient of a federal DOT Thriving Communities grant, and works collaboratively with PAED, the local economic development agency, and other critical organizations. If, as Henry Ford said, "Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success," (Muñoz, n.d.) then ETOD, with these committed partners, is likely to be quite prosperous.

Partnership Recommendations

1. Form a **"Pottstown Transit Partnership" team** committed to attend SRPRA meetings, conduct ongoing research, lead community meetings, and share information in their respective spheres of influence.
2. Schedule **quarterly town hall meetings** led by the Borough, PAED, and PAHWF to keep residents engaged and informed.
3. Reinstate the Pottstown Investors Conference (perhaps renamed **"Pottstown Transit Conference"**), originally organized and sponsored by The Hill School (later in conjunction with PAED and the Borough), with a focus on transit and ETOD planning, adding Pottstown School District, Pottstown Hospital, and Montgomery County Community College as additional anchor institution sponsors.

2. Funding and revenue streams

The Borough of Pottstown has historically struggled with underfunding. This is deeply seen and felt at the school district level, for example, where students receive \$4,000 less per child than neighboring

¹ Resources include professional planning assistance, municipal training, program management, project and plan development as noted in the Thriving Communities grant application (unpublished).

school districts (Brandt, 2019). The Borough's annual expenses also routinely exceed revenues -- not surprising given some of its unforeseen financial hardships, like the Pottstown Hospital being acquired by nonprofit Tower Health in 2018, which created a tax revenue loss of nearly \$1 million (CNNHealth, 2023). The Borough's 2024 projected expenses this fiscal year were nearly \$8 million more than the previous fiscal year, requiring an increase of property tax by 2.7% and trash service fees by 10% for the budget to pass (Brandt, 2023). Financial support for ETOD, then, will rely on the Borough's ability to secure grants and create public/private partnerships for infrastructure and development projects. Fortunately, there are millions of federal Transportation IJA² dollars available, some immediately (see Exhibit 3). Barry Cassidy, a well-respected economic development specialist in the region, emphasizes that the town needs to embrace upward mobility. He matter-of-factly believes that "having the current demographic is not sustainable unless that is what we want and how we want to stay." He encourages looking at development as attracting money to the town, with amenities that will bring people there. He agrees that the train should be affordable, perhaps via a sliding fare scale, but "we need people of wealth" if the town is going to gain traction, which may also make it easier to secure funding (Cassidy, 2024).

Funding and Revenue Streams Recommendations

1. Aggressively pursue **time-sensitive** federal and state grant opportunities, especially federal grants since the Thriving Communities grant may facilitate application priority. The Borough should contract with outside grant writers to expedite application submissions.
2. **Bring county tax assessments up to date** to increase mil rates. Explore creating a task force to consider removing the mil cap entirely.
3. **Establish a Tax Increment Financing (TIF) district** to fully utilize the TIF Guarantee Program, a \$100 million Pennsylvania fund offering loan guarantees for approved projects in designated districts.
4. **Continue strong collaboration with PAED** to cultivate relationships with developers and to maintain strong public/private partnerships.
5. Encourage community partners to **seek grants for site-based projects** that complement ETOD.

3. Workforce development and education

Workforce development focuses on education and training and often leads to better paying jobs (Radcliffe, 2023). The opposite is also true. According to the 2023 PAHWF Pottstown Community Survey, education level and living wage employment in Pottstown correlate adversely. Even worse, the average annual median income reported in near the ETOD area was \$25,000 with wages at approximately \$12 per hour -- 40% less than the county's living wage rate (Figs. 8 and 9). This gap is unsustainable and exacerbates the poverty cycle. What can we feasibly change?



Figs. 8 and 9: Pottstown employment and education percentages [2023 PAHWF Pottstown Community Survey](#)

² [Infrastructure Investment and Job Acts](#)

In 1848, Horace Mann referred to **education** as “a great equalizer of conditions of men.” Mann passionately believed the country would only advance through public education. In Pottstown, a lack of public-school funding has surely hindered the road to economic opportunity. Perhaps we could alleviate poverty and achieve equitable communities if we followed a path that began with better education and higher-paying jobs (Fig. 10).

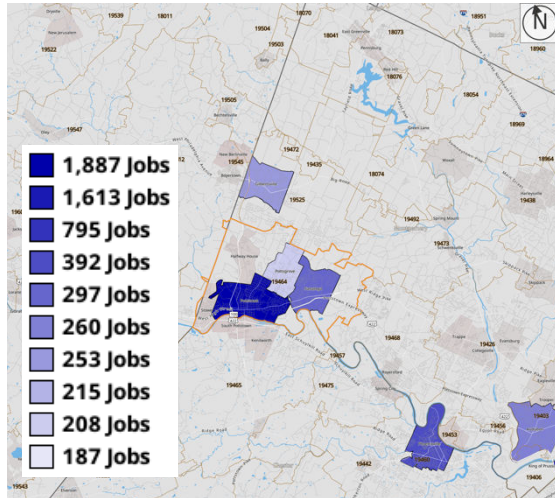


Fig. 11: Concentration of jobs in Pottstown region

area in wealthier areas that likely require cars to commute (U.S. Census Bureau, On The Map). This takes us back to the affordable housing crisis, with the best jobs often located in areas of exorbitantly high rents. It is a vicious cycle that creates difficult social dilemmas, and in Pottstown, the need for well-paying local jobs and affordable ways to get to them remains high. For this, the report offers the following suggestions.



Fig. 10: Horizontal path to poverty alleviation

Research also suggests that **proximity to the workplace** plays a role in workforce inequities. Referred to “spatial mismatch” -- the distance between the higher paying jobs and where people live, these are miles that are often too difficult to cover if one does not have affordable or easy access to transit. Fig. 11 is an image of jobs reported in the 19464-zip code. Not surprising, the highest concentration (1,887) remained in Pottstown proper, where few jobs pay a living wage, and where there is the most poverty. Pottsgrove and Sanatoga show jobs outside of the

When jobs are far from where the people who need them live, unemployment rates climb.

-Earlene K.P. Dowell

Workforce Development and Education Recommendations

1. **Partner with MCCC west campus** to hold regular workforce development trainings.
2. Offer **tuition reduction grants** for qualifying adults to continue their education at local colleges.
3. Ensure that **minority and BIPOC-owned firms and people with disabilities can benefit** from new development.
4. Create **quality jobs through ETOD projects** and give priority to local Pottstown residents and businesses.
5. Use [Community Workforce Agreements \(CWA\)](#) to secure collective bargaining agreements that include “equitable workforce development, social justice, and small business support” (U.S. DOL 2024).
6. Direct local employers to [Local Employer Assistance offered by the PA DCED](#), which includes consulting services for workforce development and offers low-interest loans, tax credits, and private financing programs to grow workforce development programs (PA DCED Fact Sheet).

4. Connected transit opportunities

Creating a sustainable micro mobility network that integrates streets, bicycle lanes, and pedestrian walkways to points of interest and need is at the heart of ETOD and will require careful planning efforts. Tom Hylton, who wrote the Borough's zoning ordinance and has made many notable contributions to the town, emphasized the importance of preserving historic architecture, having adequate sidewalks, and finding sufficient parking for ETOD. Of them all, he says, parking is the most important consideration (Hylton, 2024). As traffic increases, people will need safe, accessible, intersecting routes by which to arrive at cultural hubs, restaurants, jobsites, housing, and retail stores. The Borough has already started this connectivity through their award-winning "Walk & Bike Pottstown" program, which has facilitated a notable increase in bicycle usage across town and is noteworthy progress (Borough of Pottstown, 2024). The DVRPC also conducted a useful connectivity and traffic study of the High Street corridor (2019). However, roads like Industrial Highway, running next to the rail line, need much more infrastructure investment.

After learning about several global transit solutions in cities like Medellín and Barcelona, 23 students at The Hill School participated in a place-based design review of Industrial Highway and made several mobility recommendations (Fig. 12). A passenger rail transit survey was also distributed to approximately 650 students and faculty at The Hill School³, resulting in 129 responses (see Exhibit 5 for details). A version of this survey will soon go out to the greater Pottstown community, and it will be interesting to compare results. Likely, there is still a need for community buy-in regarding frequent use of transit options. There must be significant education and a cultural shift in how multimodal transportation is viewed. It must be perceived as affordable, accessible, and safe if it is to cross racial and socio-economic lines as an appealing mobility option.

Student Recommendations for Industrial Highway

1. Add sidewalks where currently absent.
2. Install a dedicated bike lane with bollards to protect cyclists.
3. Add a median strip large enough to support green plants and/or trees.
4. An electric trolley that would run a daily transit loop on E. High Street from the community college to the hospital.
5. A fleet of electric scooters and e-bikes (app based; small fee).

Fig. 12: Results of Urban Design Activity

Connected Transit Recommendations

1. Install **dedicated bike lanes and a walking path** on Industrial Highway where the road is widest.
2. Consider a **"shared streets" concept for connector roads** like Penn, Evans, or Charlotte Streets (north/south) and South Street (east/west) that traverse residential areas.
3. Add Pottstown Area Rapid Transit (**PART**) **bus stops** where necessary.
4. Purchase an **electric trolley to run a daily loop** on E. High Street from the community college to the hospital and subsidize fares.
5. Expand the Schuylkill River Greenway's **bikeshare program to include e-bikes and scooters**.
6. Work with the DVRPC to **complete renovations of the historic train station**.
7. Pursue an FTA grant to **build a pedestrian bridge connecting the station to additional parking** on MCCC's campus, which also facilitates access to the Schuylkill River Trail.
8. Create a plan to offer **sliding scale fares for passenger rail** use once reinstated.
9. Hire a consultant to **review all previous ULI studies and coalesce recommendations** in a way that is applicable and useful to current and future transit-related goals.

³ A [co-educational boarding school](#) founded in 1851 with approx. 550 students and 100 faculty; a Pottstown anchor institution.

5. Affordable housing possibilities

It is no secret that affordable housing shortage is now a nationwide dilemma (U.S. GAO, 2023). Between 2021 and 2022, the national shortage of affordable homes increased from 6.8 to 7.3. million. By mid-2023, homelessness had increased by 11% since 2022, accelerated due to rising housing costs (Aurand, et al, 2023). Additionally, the current need for rental housing is so critical that 4.3 million more apartments are required by 2035 if we are to meet the nation's projected housing demands (NMHC, 1). In Pottstown, home sale prices have also risen excessively over the past five years. Fig. 13 from the 2019 EIP Five-Year Plan shows a ten-year housing market forecast that landed Pottstown at \$121K in 2020 (ESI, 2019). They were off by \$100K – unimaginable at the time. Three years later, Pottstown home sales are at an average of \$310K and homes stay on the market for an average of nine days (Zillow, 2024).

Exhibit 1.5 – Zillow Housing Market Comparison, 2019

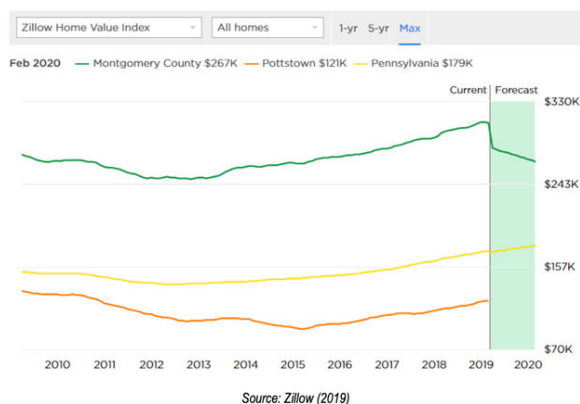


Fig. 13: EIP five-year plan housing market forecast

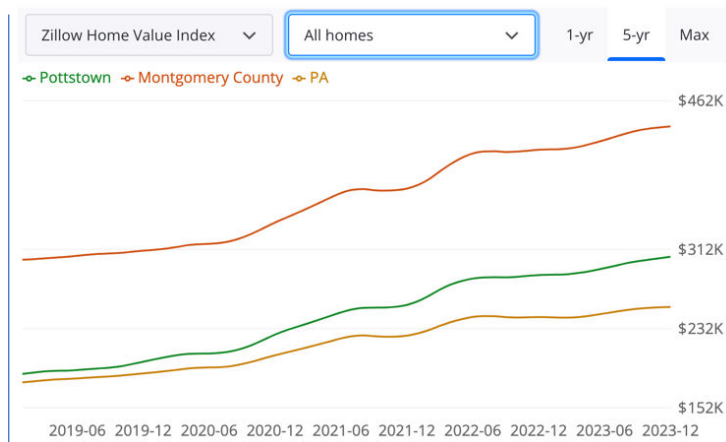


Fig. 14: Zillow 2023 home values

How can a small-town economy sustain building or adding more *affordable* housing units with such exorbitant sales prices? Pottstown may have to consider more compact housing options, like **more condos/coops, which have somehow not escalated as rapidly in resale value, and on average cost \$800 less per month to own (Bright MultiList Service 2024).**

Considering ETOD implications, we return to the PAHWF Pottstown Community Survey to examine median household income and residents' capacity to rent or own a home near the train station.

Tracts 2 and 3 from the survey's Selected Block Groups fall in the ETOD focus area and indicate that

Pottstown Selected Block Groups

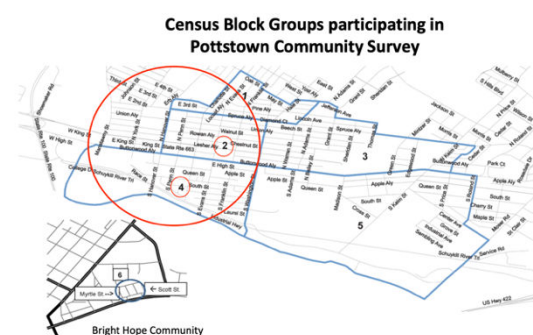


Fig. 15: PAHWF Pottstown Community Survey, 2023

Median Household Income

- ▶ (1) Tract 2089.06 (BG2) **\$54,750**
- ▶ **★(2) Tract 2089.04 (BG1) \$32,404**
- ▶ (3) Tract 2089.03 (BG2) **\$42,237**
- ▶ **★(4) Tract 2088.01 (BG1) \$28,125**
- ▶ (5) Tract 2088.02 (BG2) **\$28,121**
- ▶ (6) Tract 2090.00 (BG1) **\$24,792**

Borough of Pottstown **\$52,722**
Montgomery County **\$99,361**

median household incomes are among the lowest in the borough (Fig. 15) -- on average, a shocking 70% lower than Montgomery County. Meanwhile, according to active rental listings on the Bright Multi-List Service (MLS), the average cost to rent a 1–2-bedroom

home in the same focus area is \$1400-1600 per month – more than 50% of average Pottstown monthly income. Purchasing a home is even more costly, as described previously, and adds maintenance and repairs to the homeowner's financial burden. Typical homes in the focus area sell for \$250K on average.

Using the same PITI formula with annual taxes of \$3,500, the monthly mortgage would be \$1,938, 77% of average monthly income (MLS data provided by author). This is not feasible even in the short term, and certainly not sustainable in the long term. Any affordable housing strategies, then, must address viable solutions for both rental and owner-occupied units, like homeowner incentives. (see Exhibit 2).

ETOD is predicated on mixed-use, high-housing density. In Pottstown, that would require development of several mid-rise apartment complexes along Industrial Highway in currently vacant lots, with some below-market-rate units to maintain affordability. Per the 2015 Pottstown Metropolitan Comprehensive Plan (PMCP, 2015, pgs. 66,69), Pottstown has already been designated “Regional Core” for future land use (Fig. 17), which allows for mixed-use, medium, and high density residential (Fig. 18). Using a screenshot of Industrial Highway from Google maps, Fig. 18 shows some potential sites for these uses, including parking and the addition of a pedestrian bridge over the tracks that would connect two parking lots. It would also allow for bike access to the Schuylkill River Trail. The bridge design could be a part of the DVRPC train station plan underway. Doug O’Dell, a retired Major general in the U.S. Marine Corps with a rich family history in Pottstown, who is also a veteran of revitalization efforts and was heavily involved in the 1989 ULI study, pointed to Tamaqua, Pa. as an example of how to renovate an old train station. There, a zealous group of locals saved the station from being demolished, then turned it into a cultural heritage center with a restaurant. It also has adequate parking, crosswalks, and ADA accessibility – important considerations for Pottstown. Mr. O’Dell said emphatically that the train IS coming back. Although there have been many “passing of the guard” attempts over the years, this time everything is coming together quickly. There are few people more credible to make that statement (O’Dell, 2024).

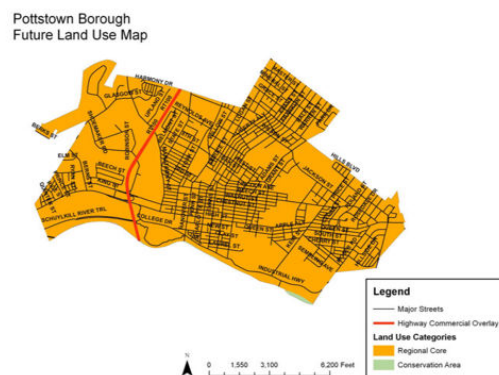


Fig. 16: Future Land Map marking Pottstown Borough as Regional Core

Figure 5-10 Future Land Use Categories and Suggested Use Options

Use Options	Future Land Use Categories				
	Conservation	Secondary Growth Areas	Primary Growth Areas	Regional Core	Highway Commercial Overlay
Agricultural Activities	✓	✓			
Low Density Residential	✓				
Medium Density Residential		✓	✓	✓	
High Density Residential			✓	✓	
Institutional	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Town Mixed-Use			✓	✓	
Village Mixed-Use		✓	✓	✓	
Business (Office, Retail, Limited Commercial)		✓	✓	✓	
Light Industrial/Manufacturing			✓		
Highway Commercial					✓
Heavy Industrial			✓	✓	

Pottstown Metropolitan Comprehensive Plan

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Fig. 17: Regional Core Use Options



Fig. 18: Potential development sites and uses along Industrial Highway

Affordable Housing Recommendations

1. Encourage **TOD-Friendly Planning Policies** (the Thriving Communities Grant addresses this).
2. Partner with an affordable housing agency and/or developer to **identify scattered site residential properties for acquisition and affordable resale**.
3. Encourage investors to **form a REIT**, like [Roots](#) (see Exhibit 2), along with tax abatements or other incentives for landlords to consider offering sub-market rate rental rates on select properties in the ETOD focus area.
4. Work with the Pottstown Borough Land Bank to **acquire properties in the proposed ETOD district** and sell them to local developers to rehab and rent at a 20% below market value rate for ten years.
5. Make **TIF incentives available to seasoned developers** to convert blighted properties into housing units with 20% of the units retained for affordable housing.
6. Through public/private partnerships, **secure funds to purchase the America's Best Motel** on E. High Street, and convert it to affordable efficiency units, available to active participants in the community workforce development program.
7. **Revive the Pottstown Housing Coalition** and use it as a vehicle to reengage landlords that own Pottstown rental units. Use the [Housing Alliance of PA's landlord engagement survey](#) and financial incentives for landlords to guide this engagement process.

6. Equitable community representation

As the final and most critical key insight of this report, adequate input from residents and local stakeholders is paramount for ETOD. This cannot be stressed enough and is perhaps the most delicate and arduous of the key observations because it involves engaging residents in a public forum and capturing their passion, which is rarely an easy task. When ULI panelist James Hardy stepped up to address Pottstown stakeholders at the conclusion of the week-long 1998 ULI study, perhaps his most memorable line was, "Pottstown's greatest asset is its people" (Steffen, 2021). That sentiment prevails in much of the town 25 years later, visibly so on social media platforms like Facebook, but also in the chatter of nearly every restaurant, brew pub, coffee shop, and community event. Pottstown locals are loyal, hardworking, and almost innocently hopeful, and those are terribly charming qualities to find in a small town that has overcome decades of adversity.

**"Pottstown's greatest asset
is its people."**

-ULI Panelist James Hardy in ULI's 2019
presentation of findings

Still, there are social silos. The mostly white-collar happy hour regulars at the Blue Elephant Restaurant likely do not frequent the mostly blue-collar Pottstown Elks Lodge just a block away. The kids flocking to the subsidized Ricketts Center after school typically cannot afford membership at the YMCA, less than a mile down the road. The hearty-but-lengthy church services at the historic Bethel AME church on Beech Street largely draw African American residents in the same way that First Presbyterian Church predominantly attracts Anglo-Saxon residents, even though they are also a mile apart. Some folks might have lived in Pottstown most of their lives and never eaten at Brunish's Sandwich Shop that is tucked like a war bunker into a basement end-of-row townhome on Lincoln Avenue. There, you can still get a damn good hotdog for \$2.00. If you are a Chicken Hill-er, you know that (if you don't know what Chicken Hill is, ask Larry Cohen⁴). The Rotary Club of Pottstown members will volunteer until their hands bleed to help the community, but they require a sizable membership fee to join, one that might not be feasible for many economically disadvantaged residents in town. The Hill School, a prestigious co-educational preparatory school established in 1851, enjoys state of the art facilities, instructors, and educational

⁴ *Chicken Hill Chronicle: Memoir of a Jewish Family* by Norman B. Cohen and Lawrence E. Cohen (2011). Xlibris Corporation.

programs, and strives to produce brilliant and well-prepared high school graduates each year. One mile away, Pottstown High School is underfunded by \$13 million compared to other public schools in the Commonwealth (Brandt, 2019). These disparities make community meetings interesting, to say the least. Yet, these are the diverse voices that must be at the table when the Borough considers any kind of equitable endeavor. Though they rarely have been, they can be if the right mechanisms are in place, like being invited by people they trust to share ideas.

Additionally, a community meeting needs convenors that people believe in enough to show up for, meeting times that are considerate of work schedules, and locations that are welcoming and comfortable. This requires the commitment of local leaders to organize regular meetings around a common cause -- ideally, with the Borough's public endorsement. There are many individual community meetings in Pottstown, but they often lack a unified vision. Howard Brown, born and raised in Pottstown with extensive family still there, shares how he hopes residents (especially those with long family histories), can participate in the economic opportunities the town has to offer, like making sure they have access to jobs that align with their skills and that preserve their history there. "I see what is happening in other places around the country, and there are ways we can be intentional about this." Howard noted (2024). We need these kinds of talks with those who have not historically spoken.



In a recent online survey sent by PAHWF to the local nonprofit and public sector leaders who have been part of the Pottstown Delegation, 100% of the respondents indicated that they were willing to dedicate time to "build civic power in Pottstown...to reduce cultural, business, and residential displacement" (from proposed mission statement, 2024). But civic power cannot be built where voices are not heard. Accordingly, these nonprofit and public sector leaders should be the first to step up and hold community meetings, making space and time for residents to discover what they really care about, then facilitate measurable change around those passions. May

it not be said years from now that ETOD moved forward without hearing what the community wanted.

Equitable Community Recommendations

1. **Create a community hub** and engage the Thriving Communities community partners to each hold a community meeting over the course of a year, visibly endorsed by the Borough, that facilitates resident and stakeholder input. PAHWF might consider granting a stipend to each organization that agrees to host a meeting that would cover food/beverages, etc. for the attendees. After each community meeting, the host would agree to enter the information gathered into a shared platform that is accessible to all Pottstown Coalition participants.
2. PAHWF could also **consider funding a series of community planning workshops with NeighborWorks America**, a national affordable housing and community development convenor. Their "Success Measures" program guides stakeholders through participatory discussions and an evaluation process, leading to specific, outcome-based solutions.
3. **Form a neighborhood partnership team** to oversee the residential area of the proposed ETOD district and apply for Elm Street designation with the PA DCED.

Conclusion

This consultancy project visits the history of a post-industrial town still rich in resources, among them a historic train station and active freight rail that runs through the town that both will be instrumental in the reinstatement of passenger rail. The report analyzes the feasibility of ETOD in a half-mile radius around the train station, examining ways that an equity lens could preserve affordable quality of life for

the town's residents and avoid widespread gentrification. It examines the strength and contribution of key stakeholders and the important role they will all continue to play as plans for the reinstatement of passenger rail advance. It considers the social and cultural dynamics that have and continue to give Pottstown depth. It acknowledges that many of the same voices have been at the planning table for decades, that there needs to be a power shift and a new narrative for equitable, sustainable change. This report also introduces the host organization, a powerful local engine that is focused on improved quality of life for all community members.

The results of this study demonstrate sufficient good faith efforts and commitment from key stakeholders to support ETOD implementation and maintain long-term success. It acknowledges that much public funding is required (but available) to move development projects forward. It emphasizes the importance of accessible, multimodal transportation around transit hubs that is safe and inviting to all. The report emphasizes narrowing the education gap, which has exacerbated poverty, and facilitating living-wage jobs that don't require long commutes. It highlights the incredible need for more affordable housing, especially in residential areas close to the train station, where ETOD will rapidly grow, and suggests that compact housing and more multifamily mid-rises are inclusion efforts that can help minimize displacement. For each of the six findings, this report offers solid recommendations to PAHWF and the Borough of Pottstown that can serve as equity outcomes to benchmark ETOD success. What the research does not and perhaps cannot predict, is how much that same community will engage in the revitalization process. If -- for matters of historic trauma, marginalization, or other reasons -- the ETOD decisions are the same people, it should just be called TOD and not pretend to be equitable.

In 2019, Pottstown's last standing, award-winning reporter, Evan Brandt, wrote a raw personal review of the town's state after he and his wife moved there in anticipation of the train coming back. He says, "We've been waiting ever since, vacillating between not being willing to be fly-by-nighters and give up; and feeling throw-up-your-hands exasperation at how often this town shoots itself in the foot when it seems to be on the cusp of great things." He continued with a sports analogy that he credited to the town-famous John Armato (or John J., or Mr. Pottstown): "You go on the field with the team you have." And, Brandt says, "I suppose the same can be said for revitalization." However, he ends his blogpost with as near a challenge to the powers that be as one could imagine, asserting that any big city or town that has made a big comeback has done so "when the town's leaders came to a realization, had a vision and pursued it with gumption and unity" (Brandt, 2019). With the right leadership, the hope that has carried Pottstown since the iron mill days will carry it straight onto that first passenger train when it comes through town on its way to Philadelphia. There will likely be a big party in one of the cars, with a bottle of whiskey from Manatawny Still Works, and they'll raise a glass to the day they always knew would come. If equity goals are met, that train will include a diverse, representative group of residents and stakeholders that have walked the miles together, cried the tears of frustration, and are grinning with the sheer and utter thrill of victory. Together, they will continue fighting for equal access to resources and all the things that make Pottstown a place to live, and stay, and belong.

Acknowledgments

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Exhibit 1: Methodology Sources

U.S. Case Studies

- Chicago, IL
- Atlanta, GA
- Austin, TX

Regional Studies

- Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission
- Montgomery County Planning Commission

Local Studies

- Urban Land Institute Reports (1976, 1989, 2009, and 2019)
- Pottstown Area Health and Wellness Foundation
- Pottstown Hospital
- Borough of Pottstown
- Borough Manager Housing Report

Surveys

- Pottstown Delegation Partners Survey
- Passenger Rail Survey

Personal Interviews

- Howard Brown, Pottstown Area Health and Wellness Foundation
- Peggy Lee Clark, Pottstown Area Economic Development
- Barry Cassidy, Consultant, Sustainable Cities
- Zachary Nelson, Borough of Pottstown
- Tom Hylton, Pottstown School District Board Member
- Doug O'Dell, Retired Major General, United States Marine Corps
- Lisa Demetrio, Pottstown homeowner

Other

- Desk research, including peer-reviewed articles; books and city reports, community mapping, posters, U.S. Census Bureau data as cited in "References"

Exhibit 2: Housing Incentives

For landlords

Real estate investors, understandingly so, protect their Return on Investments (ROE). While rental income is passive and provides a steady cash flow, it can be hard work to manage and maintain each unit while retaining tenants that pay on time and respect the property. Compared to public sector housing agencies or charities, for example, landlords likely would not feel morally compelled to reduce rents, forgive non-payments, be particularly philanthropic, or endorse an affordable housing plan that calls for rent reduction in ETOD homes. There is, however, an innovative design through [“Roots,”](#) a Reg A+ REIT in Atlanta, GA, touting a “win-win ecosystem that creates partners, not tenants (Roots). The trademarked “Live In It Like You Own It” program allows tenants to earn quarterly rebates by paying rent on time, being a good neighbor, and taking care of the property. They can then use the rebates to invest in the REIT and earn their own annual return. The most recent results yielded above 16% (Roots). This model could be considered in Pottstown.



Roots fund is up over 43%

Roots is up 43.5% from 7/1/21 - 1/1/24 and 16.96% from 1/1/23 - 1/1/24

For homebuyers

One of the biggest obstacles to buying a home, despite having qualified for a mortgage, is having enough money for a down payment. In response to that need, there are currently three homeowner incentives available Pottstown, each with some limitations as seen below. Feasible solutions to the ongoing affordable housing crisis will require that all stakeholders continue thinking outside of the box, which may include offering similar short-term investments for long-term gains.

Borough of Pottstown Homeowner Incentive Programs

Source: Hobart's Run

Organization	Income Limits	Location Limits	Required Classes	Grant or Forgivable Loan	Incentive Amount	Required Other
Montgomery County First Time Homebuyers Program (FTHB) <i>Facilitated locally by Genesis Housing</i>	Yes	Mont Co	Yes	Grant	\$15,000	-First time homebuyer -\$3000 in liquid assets
Pottstown School District Employee Incentive Program	No	Borough of Pottstown	No	Forgivable – 20% annually for five years	\$10,000	-90 days+ as PSD employee -Not own another home in the Borough
Hobart's Run Homeowner Incentive Program (HIP)	No	Focus area	No	Forgivable - \$1,000 annually for five years	\$5,000	-Must be moving from rental to owner occupied -Purchase price \$250k or less

Exhibit 3: Funding Opportunities

Local/Regional	State	Federal - <u>NOFO List</u>
PAHWF Spring 2024 Grant Cycle Apply for a “Built Environment” Capacity Building Award Deadline: March 18, 2025, at 5:00 PM.	PA Department of Health “WalkWorks” Supports the development of active transportation plans and related policies (health.pa.gov) Amount: \$35,000 (no match required) Deadline: March 22, 2024	Office of the Secretary Rebuilding American Infrastructure with Sustainability and Equity (RAISE) Grants Supports transportation projects with local or regional impact. Due: February 28, 2024
Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC) Transportation and Community Development Initiative (TCDI) Eligible activities include early-stage design, feasibility studies, travel demand management plans, marketing assessments, plans, and ordinances. Amount: \$100,000 cap Deadline: March 27, 2024, at 5:00 PM.	PA Department of Community and Economic Development Multimodal Transportation Fund Encourages economic development and ensures that safe and reliable transportation is available to PA residents. Deadline: July 31, 2024	Federal Highway Administration (FHA) Active Transportation Infrastructure Investment Program Funds the planning, design, and construction of active transportation projects such as trails, sidewalks, and protected bike lanes (Transportation I/JA Programs) Opens March 2024
Explore DVRPC’s Travel Options Program , if EOI application opens again in 2024	Explore PA 2023 Transportation Financial Guidance for more funding opportunities	Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Pilot Program for Transit-Oriented Development Planning Opens March 2024
		US Department of Transportation (DOT) Safe Streets and Roads for All Funds regional, local, and Tribal initiatives to prevent roadway deaths and serious injuries Planning and Demonstration Grant #1 Deadline April 4, 2024
		US DOT Federal Railroad Administration (FRA) Railroad Crossing Elimination Funding for highway-rail or pathway-rail grade crossing improvement projects that focus on improving the safety and mobility of people and goods (FRA, see link above). Opens Spring 2024
		US DOT Reconnecting Communities Pilot Program Prioritizes disadvantaged communities, improves daily access to jobs, education, healthcare, food, and recreation, fosters equitable development, reconnects communities by removing barriers to mobility Opens Summer 2024
		US DOT Strengthening Mobility and Revolutionizing Transportation (SMART) Grant Opens Summer 2024

Local/Regional	State	Federal - NOFO List
		US DOT Neighborhood Access and Equity Grant <i>Provides funding for planning and construction activities to connect communities by supporting neighborhood equity, safety, and affordable transportation access (US DOT, see link above).</i> Opens Summer 2024
		Federal Transit Administration (FTA) Promoting Resilient Operations for Transformative, Efficient, and Cost-Saving Transportation (PROTECT) Program <i>Ensures surface transportation resilience to natural disasters or hazards, like flooding.</i> Opens Summer 2024

Exhibit 4: Pottstown Delegation 2023

1. **Catherine Fleming**, South Eastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA)
2. **Celeste Schwartz**, Montgomery County Community College (MCCC)
3. **Craig Way**, Mosaic Community Land Trust
4. **Howard Brown**, Pottstown Area Health and Wellness Foundation (PAHWF)
5. **Karees Foster**, Making A Difference Economically (MADE)
6. **Matthew Popek**, Montgomery County Planning Commission (MCPC)
7. **Nelly Jimenez**, Acción Comunal Latinoamericana de Montgomery County (ACLAMO)
8. **Peggy Lee Clark**, Pottstown Area Economic Development (PAED)
9. **Stacey Woodland**, Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA)
10. **Twila Fisher**, The Hill School and Hobart's Run Neighborhood District

National Transit Conferences Attended:

Rail~Volution – 2022, Miami, FL

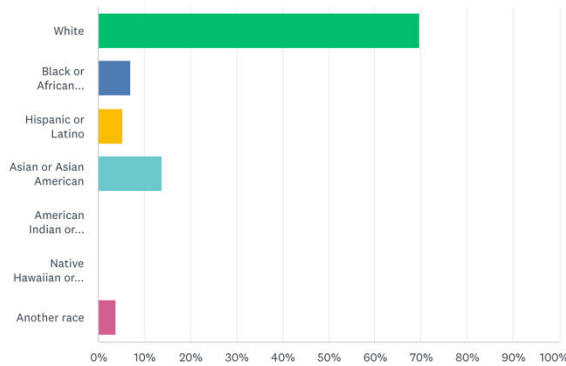
Mpact – 2023, Phoenix, AZ

Exhibit 5: The Hill School Transit Survey Results

Respondents: 129 of 650 (20%)

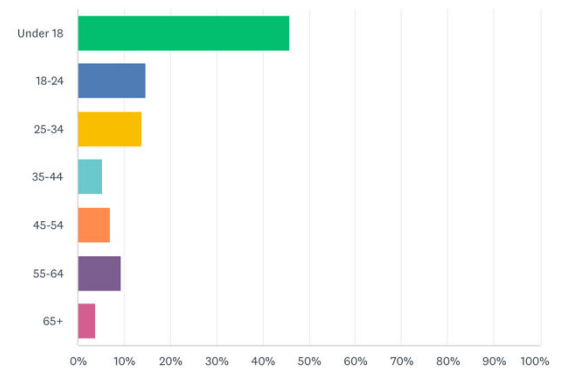
With which of the following ethnicities do you most identify?

Answered: 129 Skipped: 0



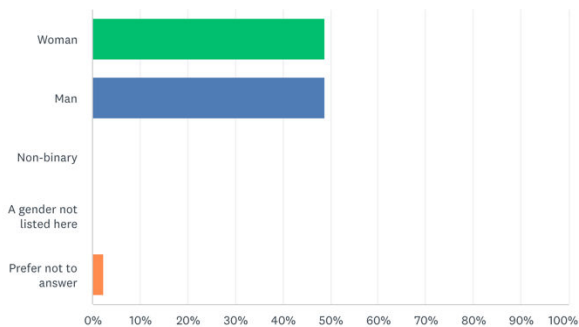
What is your age group?

Answered: 129 Skipped: 0



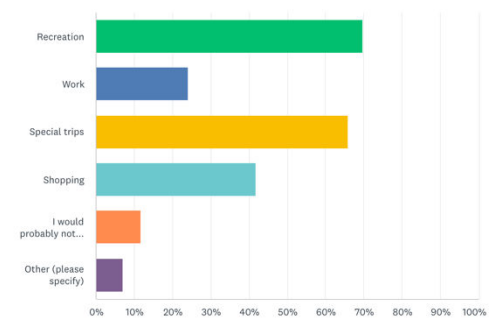
Which of the following options most closely aligns with your gender?

Answered: 127 Skipped: 2



If passenger rail service were reinstated to Pottstown, what would you most use it for? Check all that apply.

Answered: 129 Skipped: 0



How much would you expect to pay for one-way train fare from Pottstown to 30th Street Station in Philadelphia?

Answered: 127 Skipped: 2



What form of transportation would you be most inclined to use to get from your home to the Pottstown train station?

Answered: 129 Skipped: 0

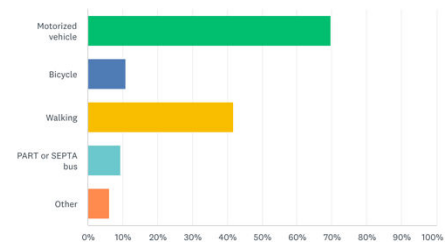


Exhibit 6: Coordinating Points from Four ULI Studies

Urban Land Institute Pottstown Studies: A Longitudinal Comparison

	1976	1989	2009 Advisory	2019
Cohesive Mission		Design uniform and attractive entryways to Borough; market special events downtown	Establish robust public/private partnership programs; hold festivals and parades, film festivals	Define mission and identity (local and regional)
Economic Development	Bethlehem Steel should subdivide industrial area to house multiple tenants; reopen Keim St. through Pottstown Works for additional access; locate and develop industrial sites; provide extension of Industrial Hwy to bypass CBD; Develop recreational areas along waterfronts; strengthen PAID to implement recommendations	Create a town center; develop waterfront; support econ dev groups like PAID; remove railroad tracks	Build on existing economic strengths; create a place of magic on five blocks of waterfront; remove the track along rivers edge; create neighborhood stabilization partnership; create new incentives for renovating upper floors of commercial buildings	Consolidate current efforts and collect key data
Business Growth/ Workforce Development	Improve the labor force by establishing vo-tech programs; improve retail market with more parking and store facades; revitalize CBD through renewal project; retain train station as a transit center	Revitalize business district; phase out airport and expand business dev. Establish MCCC satellite campus in Pottstown; enhance vocational programs; develop marketing plan to promote Pottstown; maintain business database	Consider a more business -friendly, time-sensitive approach; sell the Borough more effectively; create a robust incentive package for retailers to locate in the downtown.	Prepare residents for living wage jobs through training and education
Housing Strategies	Secure land parcels for multi-purpose, high-density housing, especially for elderly (close to services); restore and preserve historic buildings to improve tourist industry	Preserve existing housing stock; promote historic preservation	Expand market choices for new housing; revitalize existing housing	Stabilize, renovate, and diversify housing stock; create a housing inventory plan
Financing		Research borough removing millage levy cap		Explore creative financing options
Other	Lengthen runway of Pottstown Municipal Airport; Complete the Schuylkill Expressway for better access to Philadelphia; Adopt flood protection measures		Complete long-distance trail plan; look at working on an active commuter rail to Philadelphia; find a new development corporation to take the lead with a five-person board and input from civic leaders.	Leverage historic charm to become destination place

See References for ULI Citations