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The Redevelopment of Brownsville

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Brownsville, a small town located in Southwestern Pennsylvania, witnessed its population decrease by 65% from 1940 to 2000, which caused a financial downfall culminating in town council members begging the town's electricity provider not to turn off power to the streetlights (Action, 2007). Before this decline, the town used to be a thriving transportation and trade center along the Monongahela River with major historical significance. Brownsville started out as a Native American village that housed the Adena people and slowly developed into a major trade and transportation center for the early European immigrants (Rawson, 2015). In Brownsville's early history, the town's location along the Monongahela River provided the town its strength as a center of transportation. Barges and ferries found their home on this section of the Monongahela River (Hart and Bright, 1904, 245-267). Brownsville's reputation as an aquatic transportation center spread to the point that Lewis and Clark requested a boat built for them there (Action, 2007). This town also played a part in other key points in American history, including the French and Indian War and the Underground Railroad (Rawson, 2015).

As Southwestern Pennsylvania industrialized, Brownsville became a focal point in Fayette County where individuals could raise their families. Despite its former glory, the town is experiencing a population decline so severe and rapid that immediate public policy solutions need to be put in place. Brownsville, however, is not the only town suffering from this phenomenon. New York, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, Illinois, and Wisconsin, all states within the rust belt region, housed towns that experienced a similar decline after deindustrialization. Redevelopment is crucial. The solutions to these declines are multifaceted, and often require addressing educational, population, and infrastructural problems. Improving these issues in Brownsville is vital not only because of its historical significance and the benefits the residents would reap, but because of the implications the public policy recommendations may have for the numerous other towns that have suffered as a result of deindustrialization. In order to create plausible policy recommendations for Brownsville, the town's history and its current

situation must be evaluated to come up with a solution that works to solve Brownsville's compounded issues.

In the 1940s, Brownsville was an ideal town in which to raise a family. It was one of the major population centers of Fayette County, and its population of 8,059 was mostly broken into familial units (Pennsylvania, 2015a). Despite being an excellent "family town," 1940s Brownsville still had its difficulties (Mitchell, 2015). The town's residents earned an income significantly lower than the national average. The average *individual* in the United States earned \$1,368 annually (Petro, 2015). An average income of \$1,368 seemed extravagant to the families of Brownsville whose annual *household* income only amounted to \$879 (Pennsylvania, 2015a). In today's economy, this would be like comparing an individual's income of \$43,300 to a household income of \$28,400 (Williamson, 2015). To help earn this salary, Brownsville's men worked in the area's coal mines, steel mills, paper factories, chemical plants, and natural gas companies, while the women mostly worked in the town itself in small businesses, banks, hotels, and railroad stations (Pennsylvania, 2015a).

Despite Brownsville's numerous ties to industry in the 1940s, by the 1980s, tying the workers of Brownsville to any type of industry was a difficult task. Brownsville's two largest employers, the steel and coal industries, had fallen from their industrial pedestals. The exhaustion of the coalmines and the deindustrialization of the rust belt forced these major employers to begin to close their doors (Action 2007). Despite the almost complete closing of the coalmines in Southwestern Pennsylvania, the nearby steel mills in Allenport and Monessen managed to persist after making major cuts in production. The slowing of the area's steel production not only forced the loss of many steel workers' jobs, it also caused the loss of jobs in surrounding industries that relied on the steel mills to buy their products. Because of their reliance on the steel industries, the paper factories and chemical plants needed to cut jobs as the fall in demand of their products occurred, at least until other avenues of profit were found.

As many families lost their source of income, they were forced to relocate in order to search for new job opportunities. This caused Brownsville's population to plummet. Brownsville experienced a steady population decline with only 6,055 residents in the 1960s (Action, 2007), 4,034 residents in the 1980s (Pennsylvania, 2015b), and 2,804 residents in the 2000s (Pennsylvania, 2015c). Throughout this time period, the town's average income and education levels continued to remain lower than the national average. Additionally, Brownsville's decline has led to major funding issues, as there are fewer residents from whom to collect taxes. Not only did Brownsville beg not to have their street lights turned off in 2007, but the town also had to lay off numerous borough workers including policemen (Action, 2007). Having fewer police officers creates even more safety concerns for a town that has an abandoned building problem.

Brownsville's major financial issues after the deindustrialization of Southwestern Pennsylvania stemmed from the leaders of the town's inability to repurpose Brownsville into a more useful space. Norma Ryan, former mayor and leader of the Brownsville Area Revitalization Corporation, still works on renovating old, abandoned buildings in Brownsville for redevelopment (Action, 2007). Brownsville Area Revitalization Corporation (BARC) tries to save Brownsville's historic architecture by renovating the abandoned buildings instead of demolishing them. BARC's efforts however, tend to be idealistic. Not all of Brownsville's unoccupied buildings can be efficiently repurposed considering the updates in building codes since their construction in the mid 1900s. Some buildings also fail to have previous uses that would allow them to be repurposed. Some buildings also fail to have previous uses that would allow them to be repurposed such as the Union Railroad Station. Furthermore, renovating buildings tends to be a costly procedure in dilapidated areas. Once these buildings are renovated, finding new businesses to move in can be difficult considering the poor aesthetics, reputation of the town and the narrowness of the roads leading downtown. Although BARC hopes to find small business to move into the repurposed buildings, it appears that today fails to be an age for small businesses (Brownsville Area Revitalization Corporation, 2015).

Another suggestion circulating on how to revitalize Brownsville is to build a velodrome, which is an Olympic-style bicycle racetrack. The credit for this suggestion goes to a real-estate firm located in Pittsburgh named CB Richard Ellis (Action, 2007). Creating a bicycle racetrack in Brownsville though poses its own set of problems. Brownsville's elderly population currently shows a pattern of growth in the area; between the 1980s to the 2000s, the percentage of the population over the age of 65 rose to almost a quarter of the total population (Pennsylvania, 2015c). With a rising elderly population, it appears unwise to build a velodrome when a quarter of the population tends to be less inclined to do strenuous activities such as Olympic-style bike racing. Monroeville Developer, Ernest Liggett, wants to see Brownsville "become to Olympic cycling what Williamsport is to Little League Baseball," but this could be problematic considering the infrastructure issues Brownsville faces (Action, 2007). Brownsville's roads are not wide enough to provide the transportation needed to support the traffic that comes with the amount of visitors proponents of this plan wish to see. Another issue resulting from this plan is Brownsville's relative isolation from any major cities or business centers that could provide for the people who would enjoy this velodrome. Brownsville's location at over an hour drive from Pittsburgh, the closest thriving business center with a high population, can be problematic when a business plan rests on the need for a specific, atypical customer base.

A more reasonable plan for saving Brownsville incorporates multiple solutions to the various problems running rampant in Brownsville. Some of the major problems plaguing Brownsville include abandoned buildings, narrow roads, low education levels, low income levels and a declining population. The creation of a Fayette County Community College would solve these issues; its construction necessitates a campus that includes multiple buildings. To create the space for a new community college, demolishing the unsafe, abandoned buildings in downtown Brownsville becomes unavoidable. Downtown Brownsville provides a convenient location along side Route 40, and repurposing the space solves the issue of abandoned buildings that causes longstanding debates in the community. Most of the abandoned buildings downtown are past the

point of successful renovation and pose a safety threat to the community; therefore tearing down the buildings seems to be the only safe, effective solution. Considering that most of the abandoned buildings downtown do not have owners that can be held responsible for property taxes, demolishing the buildings to build a new structure allows for larger tax income for the town. This plan also solves the issue of Brownsville's narrow roads in its business district. Once the buildings are gone, the process of expanding the roads for better traffic flow becomes easier.

Moreover, creating a community college for Fayette County in Brownsville encourages a rise in education levels. Because of the convenience of having a community college within county limits, more residents will be inclined to receive a level of education higher than a high school diploma. Community colleges tend to be cheaper than other educational institutions and also usually offer tuition discounts to residents of the college's county. Because of the proximity to home and cheapness of attending a community college, Brownsville's residents would be more inclined to attend a post-secondary educational institution; this will allow for both Brownsville's adults to better their situation and for Brownsville's young adults to earn a college degree that may have otherwise been unobtainable. Only 11.5% of Fayette County's residents have earned Bachelor's degrees, and Brownsville has a level of only 15.3% (Pennsylvania, 2015c), which is less than half of the national average (College Board, 2015). Any raise in these figures would allow for a raise in living conditions for Brownsville's inhabitants, and building a Fayette County Community College encourages more people to obtain a higher education. A raise in education levels allows for the newly educated inhabitants to earn a higher wages than they would have before, and this will bring more income into Brownsville.

A problem of more slightly more importance however, remains to be Brownsville's declining population. Community colleges generally bring with them a population of young adults that attend the school. Not only will residents of Brownsville attend the new college, but also individuals from other areas will attend the school and need apartments nearby for convenience. For a young adult new to the area, finding a nearby apartment becomes a priority,

especially because community colleges typically do not offer dorms. This provides Brownsville with an opportunity not only to construct even more useful buildings, but to raise its population levels by building new complexes buildings for these young adults. Thus, it seems that the construction of a community college in Brownsville will help correct the numerous issues facing the town today such as the population decline.

Due to economic and practicality considerations, building a community college for Fayette County in Brownsville may be the best solution for the town because it allows for the major enhancements the town needs in the form of infrastructural, population, and educational developments. This is a policy recommendation that was only developed after studying Brownsville's history, the extent of the town's decline, and Brownsville's current situation. Towns that have declined since deindustrialization each have multifaceted problems as well as unique strengths. Any recommendations, such as velodromes or renovated buildings, that do not take into account the exact situations the towns face tend to fail or to achieve progress very slowly. Brownsville, as a case study, allows policy makers to see how history and current events are often linked, thus making it apparent that both have to be studied in depth and evaluated before public policy recommendations are made. It is important to realize that improving Brownsville is vital not only because of its historical significance and the potential benefits to its citizens, but also because of the implications the process of creating public policy recommendations may have for the numerous other towns in decline from deindustrialization.

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