

MONESSEN

Comprehensive Plan 2030



We Built America. Let's rebuild our home.

FINAL PLAN - JANUARY 2021

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The City of Monessen Comprehensive Plan was prepared on behalf of the Mayor and City Council:

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Many thanks to the members of the City of Monessen Comprehensive Plan Advisory Committee, local residents, business owners and other stakeholders who dedicated their time and efforts:

The plan was facilitated by planning consulting Mackin Engineering Company with assistance from MGR Consulting, Inc. (grant funding and public outreach), Melone Advertising Inc (branding and project website development) and Westmoreland County Department of Planning and Development (Blight Inventory and Mapping Project).

This plan was financed by the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED) through the Early Intervention Program. Thank you to MGR Consulting, Inc. for coordinating the effort to obtain the grant funds.

This plan was prepared by:



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The logo for the City of Monessen, featuring the word 'MONESSEN' in a bold, blue, sans-serif font with a stylized blue wave graphic underneath.

RESOLUTION

RESOLUTION NO.: 1 OF 2021
INTRODUCED: JANUARY 12, 2021
BY: PRESIDENT MATTHEW T SHORRAW
ENACTED: JANUARY 12, 2021

CITY OF MONESSEN

RESOLUTION 1 OF 2021

A RESOLUTION OF THE CITY OF MONESSEN,
WESTMORELAND COUNTY, COMMONWEALTH OF
PENNSYLVANIA, ADOPTING THE MUNICIPAL
COMPREHENSIVE PLAN.

WHEREAS, a copy of the Comprehensive Plan, which includes the text, maps, charts, and any other items which form the whole of the comprehensive plan and was made available for public review is attached hereto as exhibit “A”, and;

WHEREAS, the plan was sent to all contiguous municipalities, the Monessen School District, and Westmoreland County Department of Planning and Development for Review and comment on October 6, 2020, and;

WHEREAS, the Mayor and Council of the City of Monessen considered all comments received within forty-five (45) days of submission, and;

WHEREAS, notice of a public hearing was forwarded to the Mon Valley Independent newspaper to be advertised and published pursuant to the Municipalities Planning Code, and;

WHEREAS, the Mayor and Council held a public hearing on January 12, 2021 to hear and consider public comments, and that the comments received at the public hearing were duly noted, and;

WHEREAS, the Mayor and Council, after consideration of comments received, has determined that the plan should not be substantially revised in whole or in part, and;

WHEREAS, the Mayor and Council have found that the Comprehensive Plan is beneficial to the health, safety, and welfare of Monessen’s citizens.

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT ORDAINED AND ENACTED by the Council of the City of Monessen and it is hereby resolved and enacted by the authority of the same, as follows:

Section 1.


The Council of the City of Monessen, by this resolution, adopts the Comprehensive Plan as attached hereto as Exhibit “A”, as pursuant to Article III and Article XI of the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code.

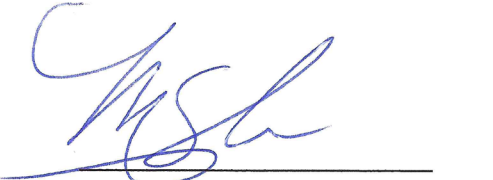
Section 2. Purpose.

Any and all previous comprehensive planning documents are hereby repealed.

RESOLVED AND ENACTED this 12th day of January 2021, by the Council of the City of Monessen, in lawful session duly assembled.

ATTEST:


Cheryl Gordon
City Clerk


Matthew T. Shorraw
Mayor and President of Council

[SEAL]

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Historic information sources include "History of Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania" by John N. Boucher, 1906 and "Monessen A Typical Steel Country Town by Cassandra Vivian, 2002.

We Built America.

From our inception, we have been rooted in heavy industry. Built along the banks of the Monongahela River, our riverfront was developed to manufacture steel, tin plates, wire fences and iron. As the industrial mills and plants grew, so did we. By 1923, there were 31 industrial plants in operation in our City, employing 5,572 people. As such, we experienced a rapid population growth in the first three decades of the twentieth century, with a population peak of 20,268 in 1930.

However, beginning in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the steel industry throughout the Pittsburgh region began to implode along with the deindustrialization of the U.S. As the steel mills closed, our population began to drastically decline, with the most significant drop between 1960 and 1970 when we lost almost a quarter of our total population. When our largest employer declared bankruptcy and demolished a large portion of the steel mill, many people left. Many people counted us out. But that is not the end of our story.

Some of us stayed. And those of us who did understand the struggle that lies ahead. We know that we live in a city built for 20,000 but have less than 7,500 that call Monessen home today. Our once state of the art infrastructure of brick streets and public water and sewerage is failing. Our downtown that was so busy in its heyday that people had to walk in the streets is now littered with shuttered buildings and vacant lots. But still, that does not define us.

We are undergoing a revitalization. If you look closely, you can see the results of those efforts. We know we have a long way to go. But we see how far we have come. Although employment is a small fraction of what it used to be, the riverfront is still home to active industry, including a coke plant and an industrial park. We are home to many thriving small businesses. We are proud of our parks.

But there is a lot of work yet to be done and we are looking forward to our next chapter. This is our opportunity to set our own course. To help guide our leaders towards a future that works for us. That improves our community. That makes us proud to call Monessen our home. If we want to see change, we need to come together as a community, now more than ever, to make it happen. This is a call to action.

Let's Rebuild Our Home.



MONESSEN

INTRODUCTION

MONESSEN 2030

It starts with planning.

Community planning is “a process that seeks to engage all members of the community to create a more prosperous, convenient, equitable, healthy, and attractive place for present and future generations,” as defined by the American Planning Association. A comprehensive plan provides a vision for the future with regards to land use, housing, transportation, parks and recreation, infrastructure and revitalization, along with the steps that are needed to make that vision a reality.

During the development of this comprehensive plan, we were faced with many questions about planning - particularly related to the reasons behind why the City was developing this comprehensive plan when it seemed to people that this process had already been completed a number of times.

Wait, didn't we already do a plan?

Yes. And No. While the City of Monessen **does not have an adopted comprehensive plan** (at least, not that anyone currently is aware of), we have completed several other plans in recent years. In particular, we completed a series of planning documents in 2017 through the Early Intervention

From the start, the overall goal of the comprehensive planning process was to be as open, transparent and engaging as possible. We feel that in order to see this plan succeed, we need to create a process that encourages inclusion, builds support and fosters ownership. A plan is only as good as its implementation and we will work to identify and bring together the community resources to make that happen.

As such, our public engagement tactics included the following:

- 1. Developed a logo and brand for the Monessen Comprehensive Plan.
- 2. Developed a project website - www.monessen2030.com and a project Facebook Page at www.facebook.com/monessen2030 to tell the City's story, publicize events and gather information.
- 3. Convened an Advisory Committee that held regular meetings and oversaw the planning process.

4. Facilitated several community clean up events to promote community pride and improve aesthetics.

5. Held five public meetings/focus groups to review the plan's goals and refine strategies.

The comprehensive plan was developed to reflect the residents' vision for Monessen and is to be implemented by the elected and appointed officials.

#Monessen2030

Program (EIP) through the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The EIP helps local governments improve their operating efficiencies in order to avert long-term structural deficits that could ultimately result in a formal declaration of distress. EIP guidelines require a six-step planning process designed to assess a municipality’s baseline financial condition, evaluate the operations of each municipal department, establish institutional priorities and recommend strategies for stabilizing the local tax base. The six-step planning process is outlined below:

- Step I: Financial Condition Assessment
- Step II: Financial Trend Analysis
- Step III: Emergency Plan for Current Fiscal Year
- Step IV: Management Audit/Review
- Step V: Multiyear Plan Adoption
- Step VI: Five-Year Plan Implementation

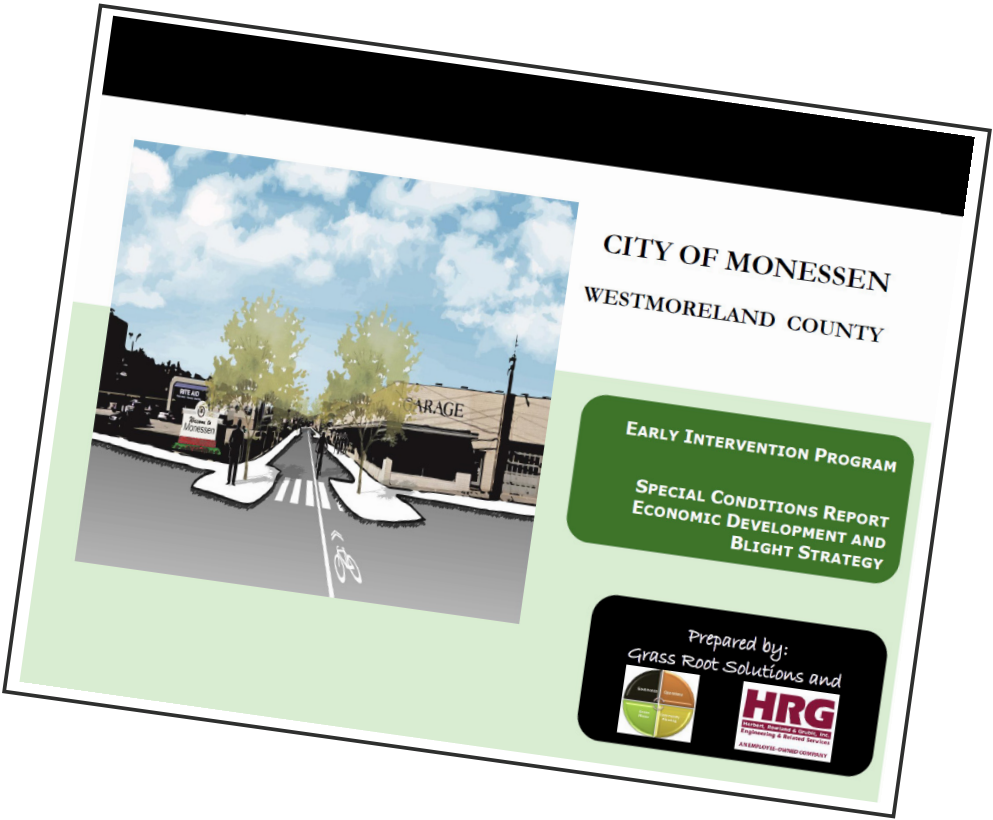
Then why are we planning again?

The short answer is that the EIP specifically recommended that the City prepare and adopt a Comprehensive Plan, as follows:

“There is no evidence that the City has ever engaged in a comprehensive planning process. This process could be a valuable exercise especially if it includes a widespread public outreach effort. Representatives from the various development partners should be included in the process (i.e. Redevelopment Authority, Monessen Community Development Corporation, Mon-Valley Initiatives, Mon-Valley Progress, and Monessen Communities that Care). Before development occurs, residents should have an opportunity to express whether additional residential and commercial development is supported, in what areas of the City they would like to see the development occur, and what types of development are most desired.”

Specifically, the EIP recommended that the comprehensive plan include:

- A focused and specific strategy for each developable site
- A redevelopment plan for the central business district



- An infrastructure development plan for maintaining roads throughout the City
- A specific and focused blight and vacant property strategy
- Specific recommendations for future land use that support the desired development and can be used to update the zoning map and the subdivision and land development ordinance.

As such, the Pennsylvania Department of Economic Development provided implementation funding through the EIP for the City of Monessen to complete this comprehensive plan.

In addition, many grant applications and funding sources specifically ask whether or not the community has an adopted comprehensive plan and if the project is identified in the plan. Funding agencies, particularly at the state and federal levels, want to ensure that their money is going to a community-supported project and is part of a larger vision.

This comprehensive plan seeks to build upon the information contained in the EIP. It is not meant to replicate it, but rather take a deeper dive into several of the recommendations that continue to be the highest priority, particularly the recommendations contained in the Special Conditions Report: Economic Development and Blight Strategy Study.

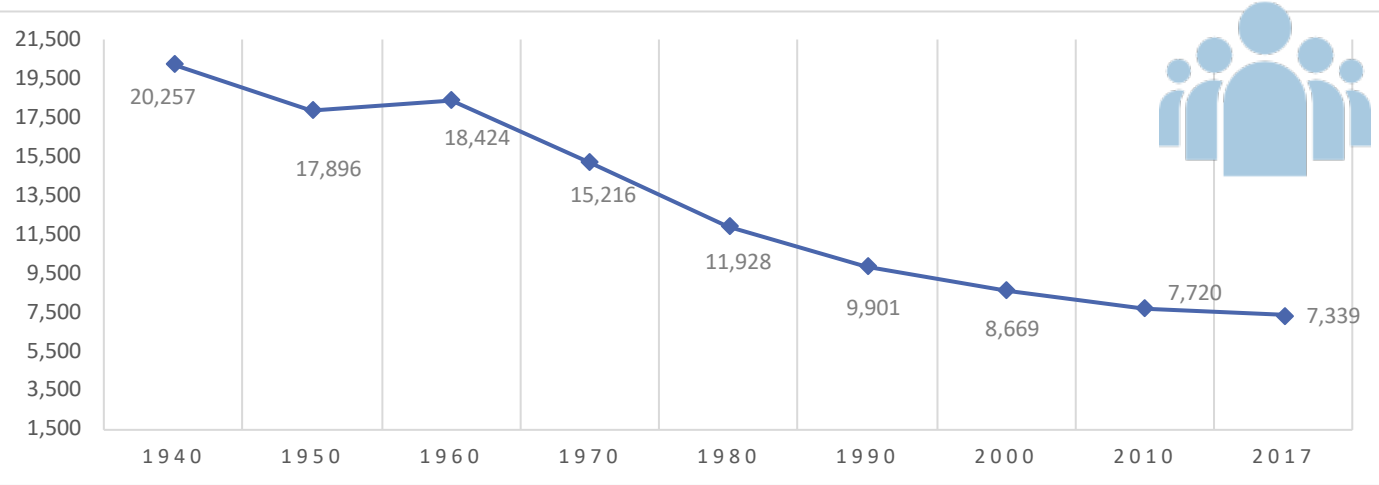
Since the EIP was completed just two years ago, we did not spend a lot of time restating the demographics and other supporting data that the EIP includes. This plan is not data-heavy but relies on the data provided in the EIP to support its conclusions.

Monessen Today

The population is almost 1/3 of what it was 80 years ago.

Development, business and infrastructure were all oriented towards the manufacturing industry. Like many industrial towns, the City’s population trends mirror that of the steel industry. Monessen experienced rapid growth in the first three decades of the twentieth century, the population increasing from 2,197 in 1900 to 11,775 in 1910 and then to 18,179 in 1920. Population peaked in 1930 at 20,268.

Beginning in the middle to late 1960s, the region’s manufacturers, especially the steel industry, found it harder to compete, which led to employee layoffs. In 1972, the closure of Page Steel and Wire Company was a major setback to the city. A far greater blow to Monessen occurred when its largest employer, Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel, closed nearly all its Monessen operations in 1986. Once this activity began to decline across the nation, Monessen residents began to quickly leave the City searching for other employment opportunities.



source: 2017 Census estimates:

The population is not only shrinking, but aging.

- While the population losses have relatively stabilized since 2000, it is still decreasing and is expected to continue to decline.
- Monessen’s median age increased from 46.2 in 2000 to 49.1 in 2017, reflecting a loss of working-age residents, primarily between 35 and 54 years.



Monessen’s median age increased from 46.2 in 2000 to 49.1 in 2017.

Housing choices are limited.

- The housing stock is older, with 95% of all units having been built prior to 1970. The median home has 5.5 rooms and the bulk of the homes (77%) have 2-3 bedrooms.
- The majority (77%) of all units are 1-unit detached, or traditional single-family homes. This is a decrease compared to 2014 (80%). The remaining 13% are a mixture of multi-units.



Housing values vary greatly.

- In 2017, there were an estimated 4,605 total housing units, a loss of 361 units since 2000. Of the total housing units, 945 were vacant (20.5%).
- In 2016, the median property value declined to \$73,800 from the previous year’s value of \$75,800. However, the largest share of households have a property value in the \$100k-\$125k range.
- The Monessen housing market has a score of 44 (out of 100) on Redfin.com, which is considered somewhat competitive. While the average home price sold was \$29,000, recent sales prices reflect a low of \$10,000 for a 3-bedroom home near downtown to \$169,900 for a 3-bedroom home on the hill.¹

The housing 21% vacancy rate is



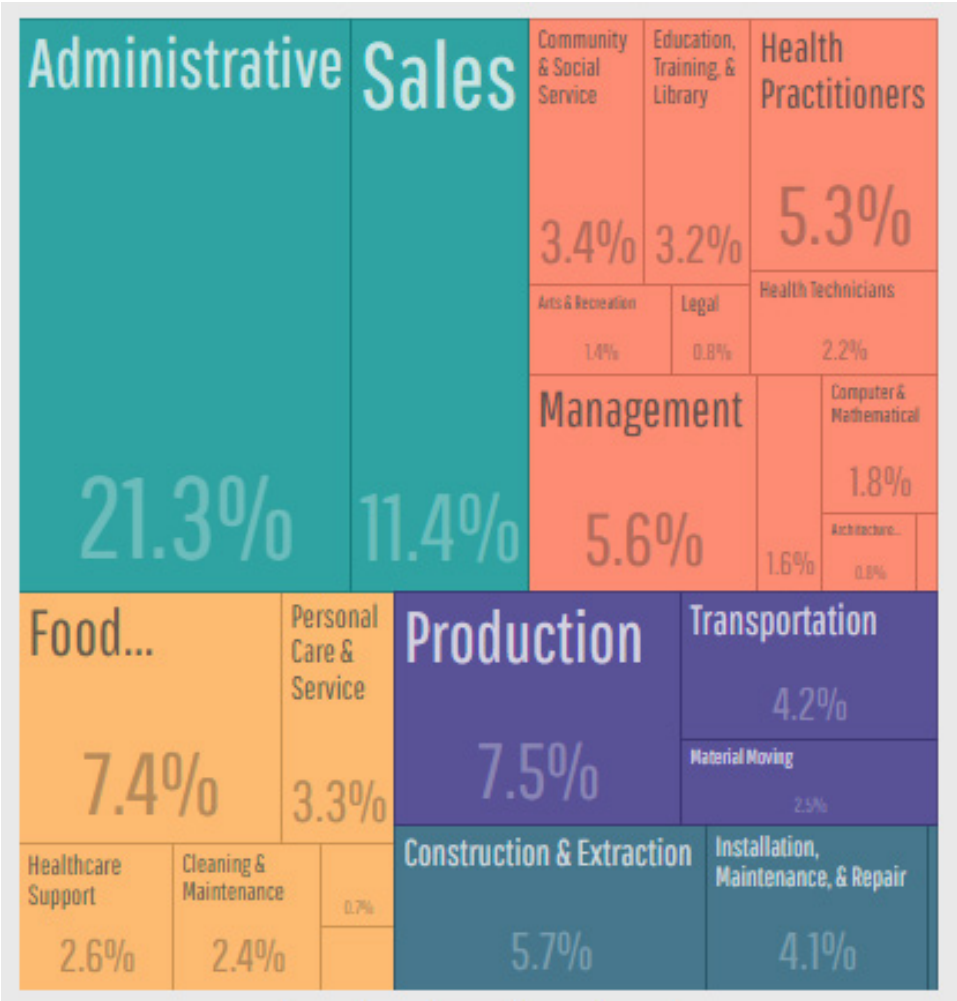
\$74,000

is the median home value

1 <https://www.redfin.com/city/12948/PA/Monessen/housing-market>

Manufacturing jobs are still here.

- The economy of Monessen employs 3,251 people. The economy is specialized in Utilities; Management of Companies & Enterprises; and Healthcare & Social Assistance, which employ respectively 3.82; 3.75; and 1.48 times more people than what would be expected in a location of this size.
- While unemployment rates spiked after the 2008 Recession, as of the end of 2019 they had fallen back down to pre-recession levels of 5%.
- The largest industries in Monessen are Healthcare & Social Assistance (669), Retail trade (487), and Manufacturing (320), and the highest paying industries are Utilities (\$44,038), Professional, Scientific, Tech Services (\$33,750), and Educational Services (\$28,510).



- Industry is still a key player in Monessen. ArcelorMittal, a conventional coke plant producing high quality coke and related carbon by-products, and the Riverfront Industrial Park. ArcelorMittal occupies 45 acres of riverfront property and employs 179 people.
- The Monessen Riverfront Industrial Park is located adjacent to ArcelorMittal along the Monongahela River on 26.2 acres. The park was developed by the Westmoreland County Industrial Development Corporation and then sold the buildings to Farnham and Pfile Company, Inc., an engineering and construction company. As of 2019, there are 11 companies located in the Riverfront Industrial Park, employing approximately 200 people.
- The EIP states that per employment projections by the Southwestern Pennsylvania Commission (SPC) show the City is expected to add 381 new jobs by 2040. The largest increases are expected to be in the service industry where nearly 200 new jobs are projected and some additional manufacturing jobs projected in the Monessen Riverfront Industrial Park.

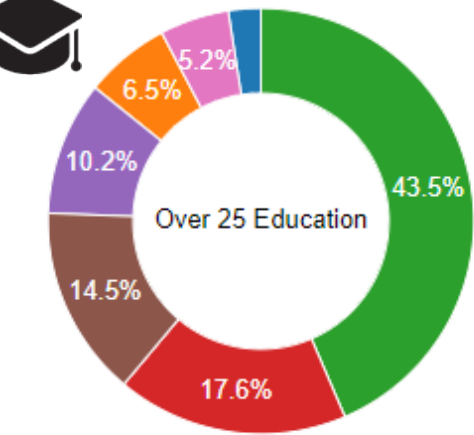


19%

of Monessen residents are living below the poverty level

Lower education = lower Income & higher poverty.

- “Americans are more educated than ever before” found the United States Census Bureau, reporting that in 2017 for the first time in history, 90% of Americans over the age of 25 have finished high school and more than one-third have a college degree or higher.¹ Over 92 percent of Westmoreland County’s population has a high school diploma or equivalent; however the County lags behind in terms of college graduates. The County’s Plan notes that as the economy continues to evolve and technology advances, there is likely going to be a shift towards a need for post high school education.
- The same study cited the pay disparity between those



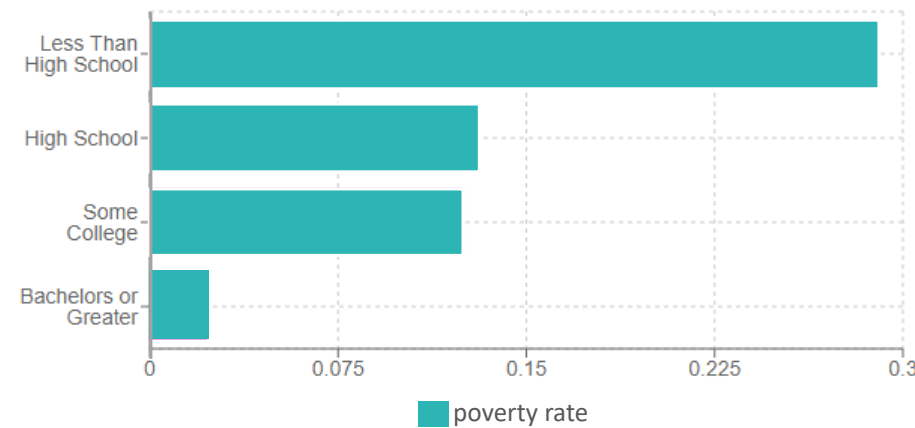
- Less Than 9th Grade
- Ninth To 12th Grade
- High School Grad
- Some College
- Associates Degree
- Bachelors Degree
- Graduate Degree

¹ “US Census: Americans are More Educated than Ever Before.” <https://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/us-census-bureau-americans-are-more-educated-than-ever-before/4546489.html>. August 29, 2018.

with a college degree and those without. In 2016, the national average for people with high school degrees earned 35,615 per year; those with a four-year college degree earned \$65,482, and people with advanced degrees earned \$92,525. In the City, the pay scales are significantly lower - with high school graduates earning \$26,609; college graduates earning \$47,400 and advanced degrees earning \$56,250.

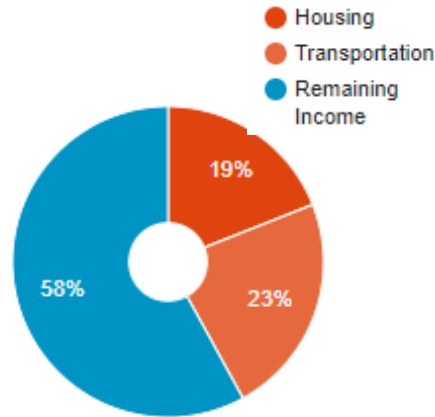
- The median household income in Monessen is substantially lower than that of the US, PA, Westmoreland County and the surrounding metro areas (Pittsburgh and Greensburg).
- Within the City itself, income levels vary. The southern areas of the City have the highest median incomes (\$46,000) compared to just \$19,000 for the neighborhoods closest to Downtown.
- The poverty rate in Monessen is 19.10%, which translates to an income below \$11,880 for a single person or \$24,300 for a family of four. The largest percentages of persons living in poverty in Monessen are high school dropouts (29%), followed by high school graduates (13%) and then persons with some college but no degree (12%). The population most at-risk for poverty are people of multiple races (49%), black (39%) and Hispanic (31%).

Monessen Poverty Rate by Education



Source: <https://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/legis/LI/uconsCheck.cfm?txtType=HTM&yr=2015&sessInd=0&smthLwInd=0&act=0067>

- A comprehensive way of looking at housing affordability is to factor both housing and transportation costs, as typically a household’s second-largest expenditure is transportation cost. The typical Monessen household is spending 42% of their monthly income on housing and transportation costs, leaving just 58% for their remaining expenditures.²



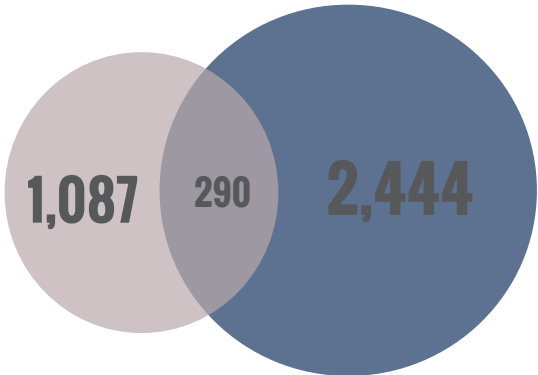
Residents have moderate access to jobs.

- Monessen’s workers scatter to a variety of destinations across the region. About 10% work in Monessen, 10% commute to Pittsburgh each day, another 10% work within the Mid-Mon Valley (neighboring communities Charleroi and Donora offer the largest job concentrations in the region) and the rest are scattered around the region.

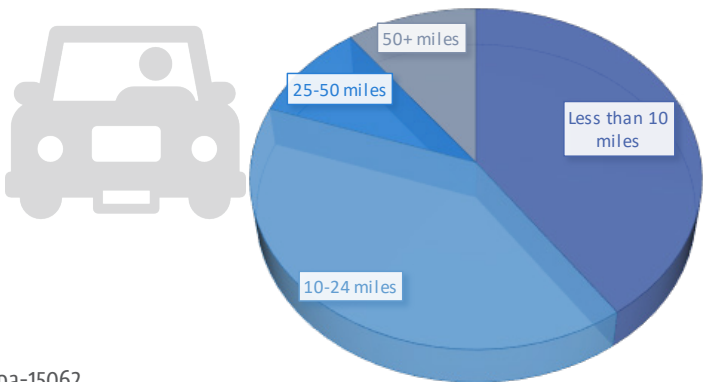
63% of working Monessen residents have jobs outside of the City.

We are a car-dependent City

- Commuting patterns show that while almost half of the residents have less than a 20 minute commute, many are commuting upwards of 45 minutes.
- Walk Score (walkscore.com) measures the walkability of communities based on the availability of nearby places and pedestrian/bicycle friendliness. The City of Monessen has a Walk Score of 27 and a Bike Score of 10 (scores are out of a possible 100, which is a walker/biker paradise),³ which is pretty low for a small, urban city.



Live in Monessen and work elsewhere
Live and work in Monessen
Work in Monessen and live elsewhere



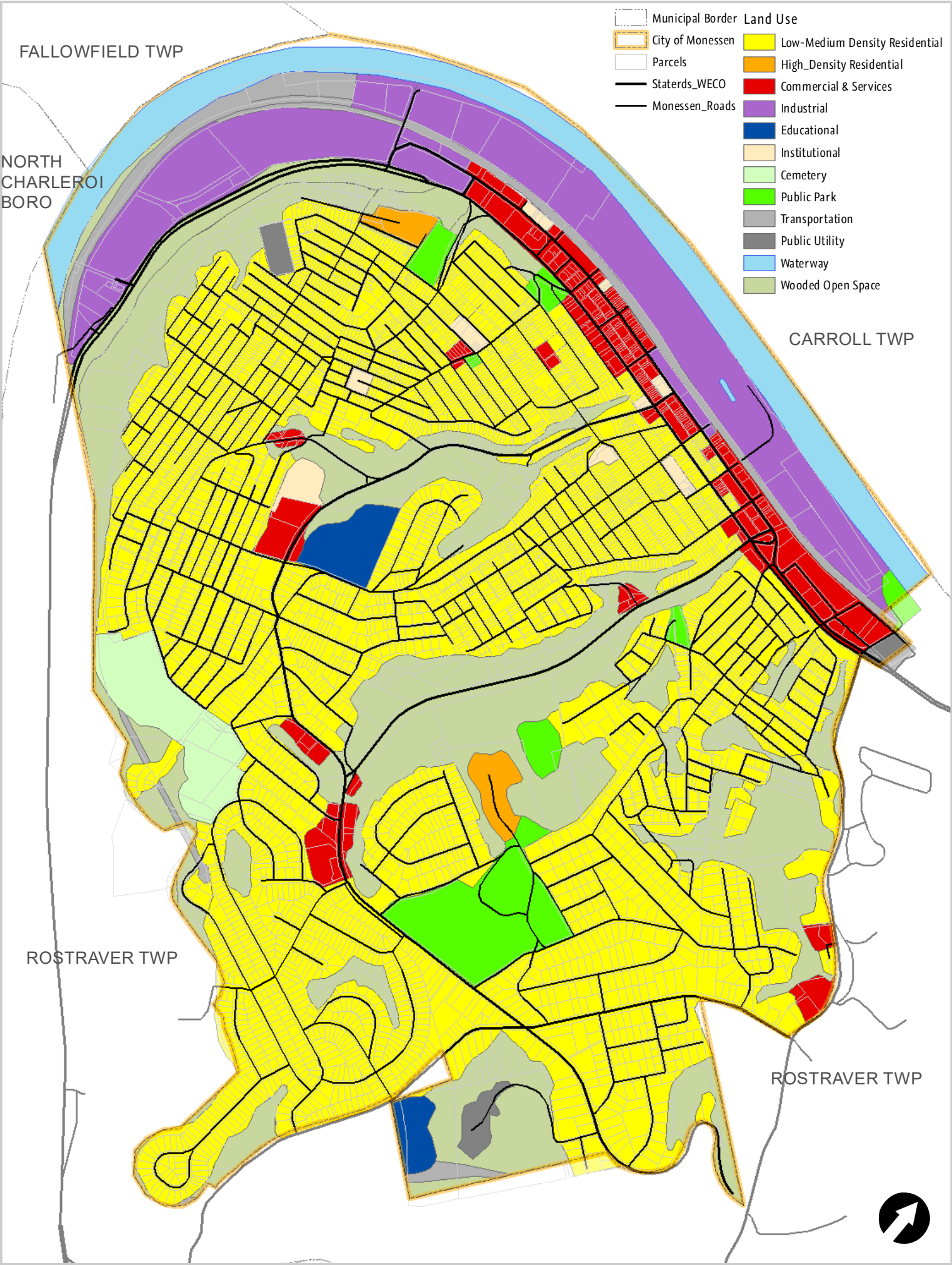
² <https://htaindex.cnt.org/>
³ <https://www.walkscore.com/score/1323-rostraver-st-monessen-pa-15062>

What is the impact on land use?

At its base, a comprehensive plan is all about land use. The harsh reality is that Monessen now finds itself in a position where it manages a City built for 20,000 with a population less than 7,500. The impacts of this are great.

- The downtown, once an active and vibrant concentration of retail and services to support the industry along the river, is now rife with vacant storefronts and gaps where buildings have been torn down.
- Similarly, the residential neighborhoods are full of vacant and abandoned homes. Many of these have fallen into disrepair, causing falling property values and public safety concerns.
- With a shrinking tax base, the City has less money to maintain an infrastructure system built for a population almost three times its current size. Like many older, urban communities, water and sewer lines are aging and failing. Streets are in need of repaving.

Table 2.1: Land Use 2019		
	Acreage	% of Land Use
Low-Medium Density Residential	1,018.4	54.9%
High Density Residential	13.0	0.7%
Commercial Services	91.2	4.9%
Industrial	164.6	8.9%
Institutional	14.3	0.8%
Educational	20.2	1.1%
Cemetery	32.9	1.8%
Public Park	56.3	3.0%
Transportation	51.0	2.7%
Public Utility	11.6	0.6%
Wooded Open Space	382.3	20.6%
Total	1,855.8	100.0%



Comprehensive Plan public meeting held in March 2019 at the Salvation Army. Over 50 people were in attendance.



Looking to Our Future

What do WE want OUR CITY to be in 2030?

From the start, our overall goal was to be as open, transparent and engaging as possible. We felt that in order to see Monessen succeed, we needed to create a process that encouraged inclusion, helped to build support and foster ownership. This is not a plan developed by the consultant for Monessen. Rather, it is a process that was facilitated by the consultant but developed by the residents of Monessen. The bulk of the process focused on community engagement to develop a consensus about what future the community wants, and then deciding what is necessary to achieve it.

You Spoke. We Listened.

We spent a lot of time talking to residents, stakeholders, businesses and property owners about what their vision is for the City of Monessen. We used a variety of methods throughout the course of 2019 in order to keep the community engaged so that the plan is reflective of that vision.

“We will work together to revitalize our city. Our focus is the redevelopment of our downtown and offering safe neighborhoods through blight removal.”

Monessen 2030 Vision Statement

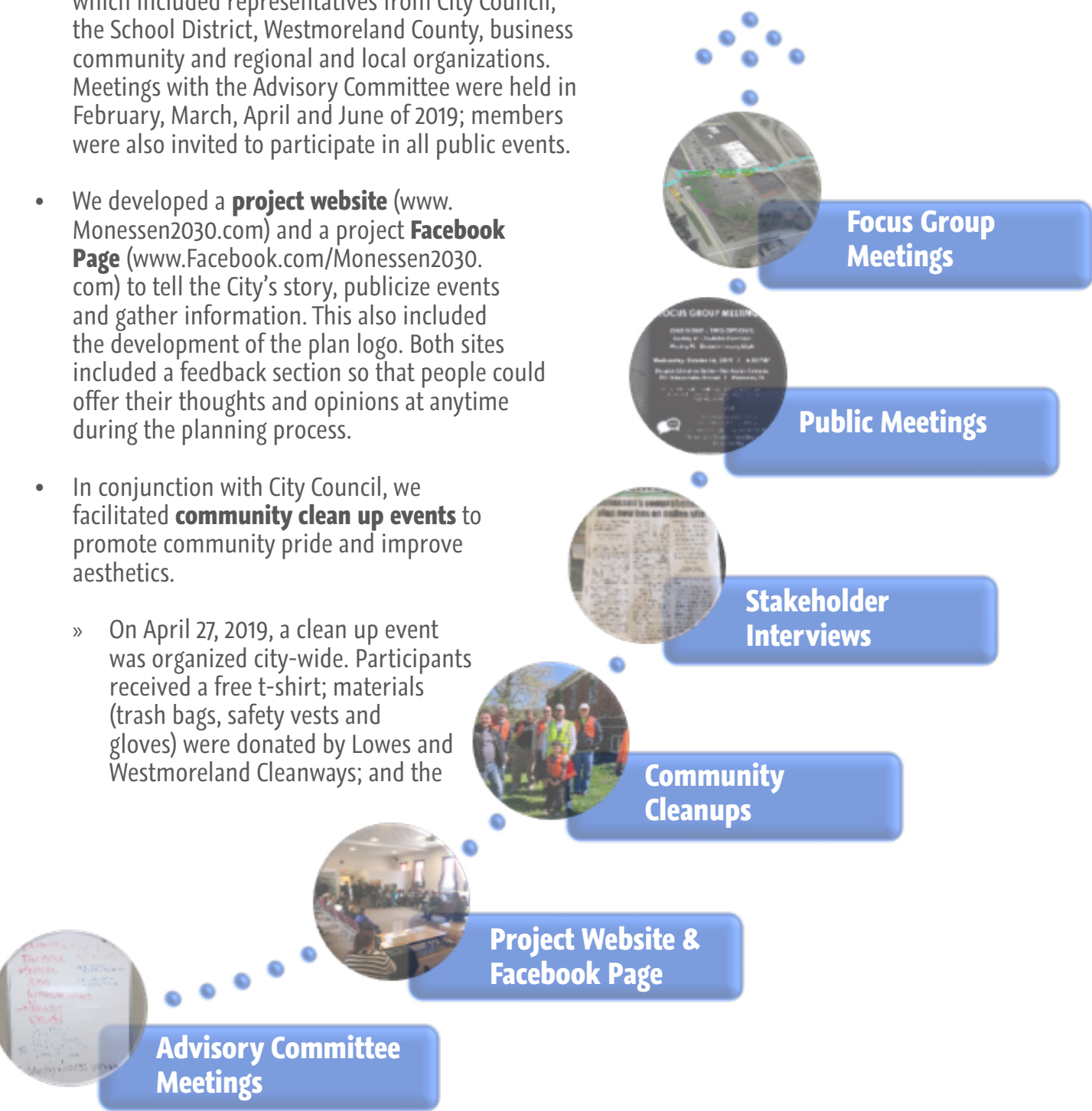
A vision statement captures what community members most value about their community, and the shared image of what they want their community to become.

Who did we talk to?

- An **Advisory Committee** of approximately 20 residents was organized to help oversee the plan, which included representatives from City Council, the School District, Westmoreland County, business community and regional and local organizations. Meetings with the Advisory Committee were held in February, March, April and June of 2019; members were also invited to participate in all public events.
- We developed a **project website** (www.Monessen2030.com) and a project **Facebook Page** (www.Facebook.com/Monessen2030.com) to tell the City’s story, publicize events and gather information. This also included the development of the plan logo. Both sites included a feedback section so that people could offer their thoughts and opinions at anytime during the planning process.
- In conjunction with City Council, we facilitated **community clean up events** to promote community pride and improve aesthetics.
 - » On April 27, 2019, a clean up event was organized city-wide. Participants received a free t-shirt; materials (trash bags, safety vests and gloves) were donated by Lowes and Westmoreland Cleanways; and the

Monessen2030

A plan developed by, and for, the Citizens of Monessen



- Salvation Army provided a free lunch to all participants. The group clean-up efforts focused on 6th Street Park and 9th Street Park, but residents were encouraged to clean up their own streets and neighborhoods on their own. Over 30 people participated.
- » On May 11 and June 22, 2019, smaller clean-up efforts were held at the Anthony Madison Memorial Park.
 - We also interviewed **key stakeholders** that included City departments and regional organizations. Stakeholders included the City police department, Fire department, Public Works, City Engineer, Code Enforcement, Mayor/City Council, Monongahela Redevelopment Authority, Monessen Community Development Corporation, Mon Valley Initiative, Westmoreland County Housing Authority, RE/MAX Select Realty, SPS Monessen Family Center, Monessen Public Library, Monessen School District and Penn State Extension.
 - All residents and interested persons were invited to participate in the plan through a series of **public meetings** and **focus group meetings** to collect input, develop goals and refine strategies. The meetings were advertised via the local newspaper, online (project website/social media) as well as e-mail invitations to past project participants. In addition, meeting flyers were provided to local businesses (i.e. Community Bank, Foodland).
 - » On March 20, 2019, the first public meeting was held at the Salvation Army. Approximately 50 people attended the open forum to offer their opinions on the issues facing the City and what we should do about it.
 - » On May 22, 2019, a second public meeting was held at the St. Spyridon Hellenic Center. Approximately 30 people attended the meeting and were divided into working groups to review draft goals and provide feedback on initial recommendations.
 - » On August 7, 2019, a third public meeting was held at the Douglas Education Center. Approximately 35 people attended the meeting and were provided fake money for them to “invest” in their priority goals. Participants were then divided into working groups for the top four goals to discuss potential strategies.
 - » On October 16, 2019, two focus group meetings were held at the Douglas Education Center. Approximately 20 people attended these meetings, which focused on discussing specific strategies to revitalize downtown and address the housing blight.

BLIGHT ←
 TAX BASE
 SCHOOL
 JOBS
 INFRASTRUCTURE
 TRANSIT
 DRUGS
 POLITICS
 #1 PERCEPTION
 Relationship w/ business community
 - gov.

ABSENTEE
 LANDLORDS
 Homeowners
 programs → education
 Code enforcement —
 inspections — taxes

List of issues facing Monessen from the initial Advisory Committee meeting for the Comprehensive Plan, held in February 2019.

What did you say?

The first few meetings for the Comprehensive Plan served to identify the issues facing Monessen. We asked. You answered.

1. **Address the Overwhelming Blight.** Almost everyone in Monessen agrees that addressing and removing the blighted buildings within the City is a top priority. The downtown and neighborhoods are littered with vacant and crumbling buildings that not only pose a safety hazard, but an aesthetic concern.
2. **Increase the Tax Base.** The City is facing financial woes. The millage rate is as high as permitted under Pennsylvania law. The population is decreasing. The City and/or Redevelopment Authority own too many properties, effectively making them a drain on City resources.
3. **Improve the School District.** The Monessen School District compares poorly to other public schools in Pennsylvania. It ranks near the bottom in terms of standardized test scores (bottom 16% of PA high schools), graduation rates (85-89% compared to 92% PA median); college admission testing participation (bottom 28% for participation) and family income (bottom 8% for income levels). It is hard for the City to attract young families to live here when the school compares poorly to the surrounding districts.
4. **Provide More Jobs.** With Monessen home to just a fraction of the jobs of the historic mills and manufacturing companies located here, there is a need for more jobs to locate within the City to keep and/or attract new residents.
5. **Address Failing Infrastructure.** The City is built on an aging infrastructure that is failing quicker than the City has money to fix the problems. There are daunting issues to addressing deficiencies related to the transportation network and public water and sewerage systems.
6. **Increase Transit Opportunities.** Many people expressed frustration that although there is public transit (bus service) to Pittsburgh, there is not service to areas like the City of Washington or the City of Greensburg.
7. **Combat Drugs.** Like many communities, the opioid crisis has hit Monessen and overall, there is a lack of a labor force available that can pass the mandatory drug tests required by many companies.



Comprehensive Plan public meeting held in August 2019 at the Douglas Education Center. Over 35 people were in attendance.

- 8. Improve Leadership and Unity.** City government is fractured and with a shoestring budget, there is a lack of professional staff on board to help guide the City. Overall, there is a prevailing public perception that nothing will change. No one can do it alone. It is time for everyone to put aside their differences and work together towards the common goal - a revitalized Monessen.
- 9. Improve Public Perception.** Monessen is home to many wonderful assets, ranging from the Douglas Education Center to City Park, that are not fully realized due to a negative public perception of the City. The City needs to do a better job of marketing its assets rather than allowing media headlines to dominate and control the narrative.
- 10. Improve the Relationship between the City and the Business Community.** The City is still home to many local businesses and a priority is to retain these businesses. Some local business owners cited a need to improve the relationship between local government and businesses.
- 11. Provide More Entertainment Options.** While many people noted that the City has exceptional parks and recreation areas, there is a need to improve some of the facilities, offer more programs and events and develop an indoor entertainment venue.
- 12. Leverage the Diverse Community.** Monessen is a diverse community, with almost 17% of its residents identifying as African American or a race other than white. Several new residents at the public meetings expressed that this diversity is what drew them to Monessen.

Through a series of public meetings and goal ranking exercises, the Advisory Committee settled on three goals in which the Monessen 2030 Plan is focused:

- 1. Revitalize Downtown.**
- 2. Eliminate Blight.**
- 3. Build Capacity for Implementation.**

“The overarching goal of this Comprehensive Plan is to enact strategies that attract, develop, and retain a diverse and stable workforce that will sustain a healthy economy. To do that, we must plan, investigate, and reimagine our Westmoreland.”

- Reimagining Our Westmoreland, pg. 5



Reimagining Our Westmoreland

Didn’t the County just do a plan?

Yes. In December of 2018, Westmoreland County adopted its Comprehensive Plan “Reimagining Our Westmoreland.” The County spent a lot of time, energy and effort to identify core objectives and strategies (see page 31) that they intend to invest resources in for implementation. While not ALL of the actions and strategies identified in the County’s Plan apply to Monessen, it is important to identify where our priorities align and how we might leverage the County’s Plan to implement our own plan locally. The County is only as strong as its municipalities. We need to position ourselves as one of the communities that is ready for investment and has a plan in place that demonstrates our vision and where we are going.

So now what?

There is no simple solution. No quick panacea. It took decades of decline for us to be where we are today. Change is not going to happen overnight. And certainly we are not naive enough to believe that a plan is going to turn things around by itself. Rather, we engaged in a planning process in order to bring our community together.

It is no secret that our government has been fractured. But if we want to create a bright future for our residents today and our children tomorrow, we need to put aside our differences and work together towards a common goal. **And that is what this plan seeks to define - a vision and goals that we, the community, believe in.** Ultimately, we all want the same thing - to be a city that people are proud to call home.

CORE OBJECTIVE 1: ALIGN WORKFORCE, EDUCATION, EMPLOYERS AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

- 1. Champion Skilled Labor
- 2. Leverage Local Talent
- 3. Assist Small Businesses
- 4. Advance Entrepreneurialism
- 5. Connect with Tech
- 6. Provide Development-Ready Sites

CORE OBJECTIVE 2: DISCOVER WESTMORELAND

- 1. Create & Promote a County Brand
- 2. Cultivate Arts & Entertainment
- 3. Welcome Everyone
- 4. Grow Local
- 5. Develop Recreational Destinations

CORE OBJECTIVE 3: REPOSITION OUR TOWNS

- 1. Invest in Downtowns
- 2. Provide Housing Options
- 3. Cultivate a Restaurant Industry
- 4. Utilize Planning Best Practices
- 5. Direct Density

CORE OBJECTIVE 4: CONNECT WITH PARKS AND NATURE

- 1. Enhance Trail Systems
- 2. Make Parks Welcoming & Accessible
- 3. Preserve Open Space & Protect Natural Assets
- 4. Improve & Sustain Water Resources



CORE OBJECTIVE 5: BUILD HEALTHY AND WHOLE COMMUNITIES

- 1. Eliminate Blight
- 2. Invest in Beautification
- 3. Go Green
- 4. Bolster Age-Friendly Communities & Services
- 5. Get Healthy
- 6. Address Fragmentation
- 7. Create a Design “Playbook”

CORE OBJECTIVE 6: PLUG INTO THE NEW ECONOMY

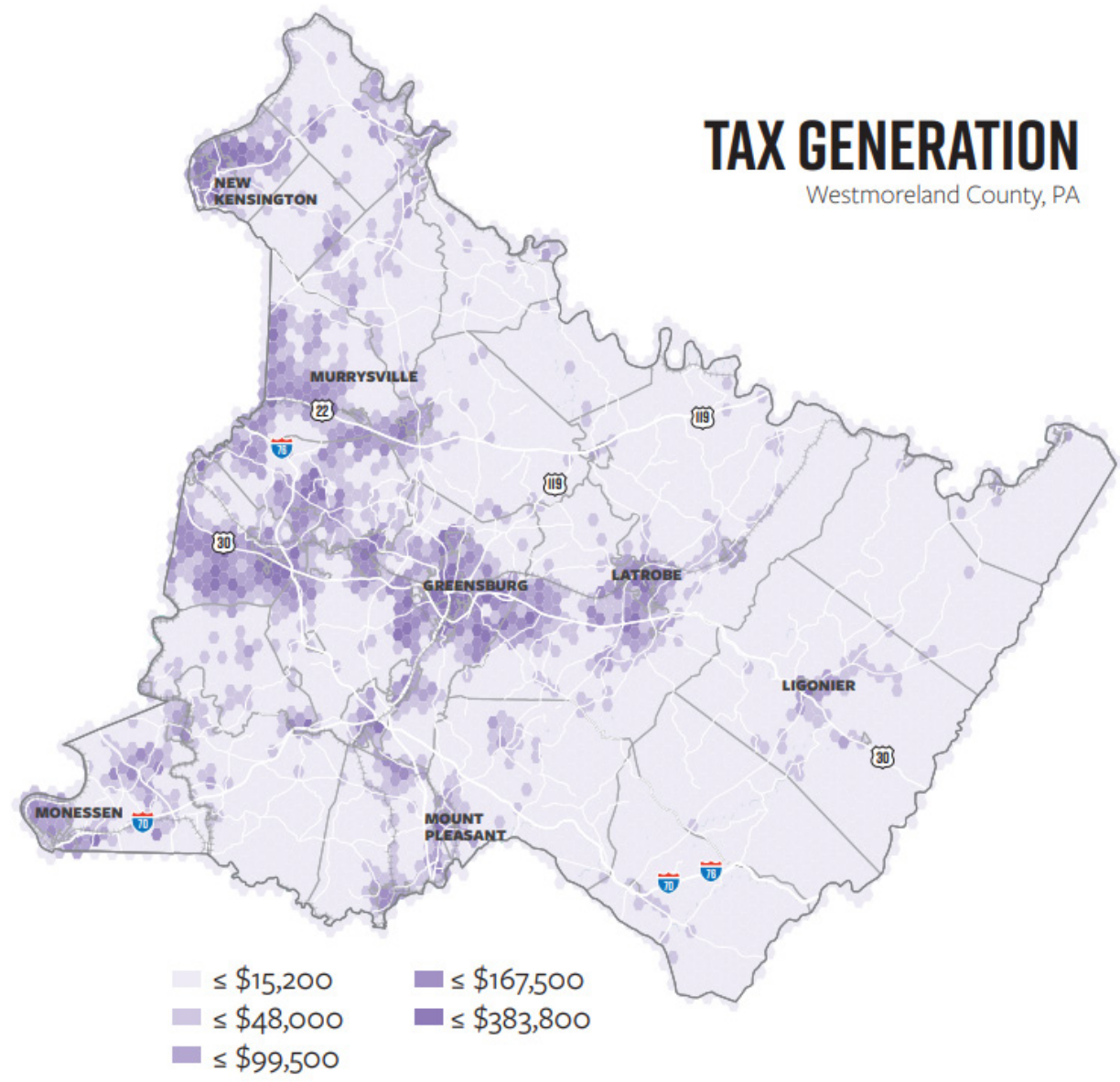
- 1. Develop Broadband Capacity
- 2. Integrate New Technologies
- 3. Invest in Industry 4.0
- 4. Embrace Hemp

CORE OBJECTIVE 7: CREATE TRANSPORTATION CHOICES

- 1. Enhance Transit, Increase Ridership, & Promote Transit Oriented Development
- 2. Create Mobility Plans
- 3. Increase Walkability & Biking Options
- 4. Increase Flight Options
- 5. Improve Passenger Rail Service
- 6. Augment Ridesharing Options
- 7. Focus on Freight



Priority Goal #1: Revitalize Downtown.



“Across Westmoreland County, the denser, more urbanized neighborhood centers, town centers, and regional urban cores generate the most taxes. These unique areas of Westmoreland are the hearts of their respective communities, but some have struggled over the past few decades as previous generations adopted attitudes leading to disinvestment. Now, more than ever, the County’s downtowns are uniquely poised for revitalization and transformation, as their importance is being appreciated again and a national wave of new attention and investment is igniting downtowns across the country.”

--- Reimagining Our Westmoreland, page 38.

Despite the issues in the City, it continues to be one of the higher tax-generating areas in Westmoreland County. The City needs to establish itself as a place ready for investment - this includes both policy changes as well as capital investments. The local government needs to demonstrate to public and private developers that it is investing in itself - and they should too.

Defining the Problem.

The City of Monessen was built at a time when manufacturing dominated the region and people lived within walking distance to their work. With a shrinking population, the City finds itself having to maintain infrastructure for a City three times its size.

The downtown is too large and spread out.

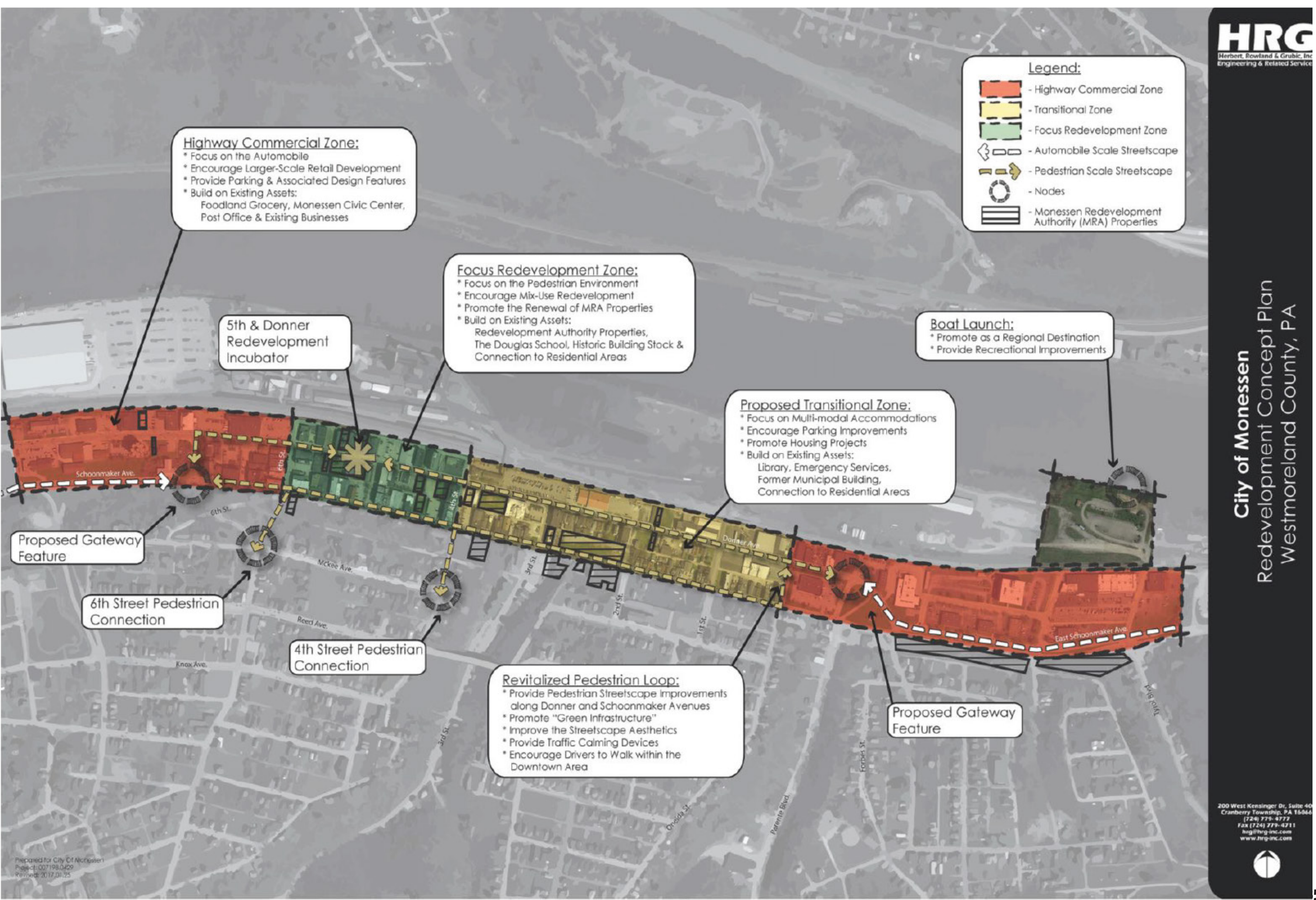
Spanning more than ten blocks along two main streets (SR 906 functions as two one-way streets along Donner Avenue and Schoonmaker Avenue), the expanse of the commercial district creates a barrier for redevelopment efforts. The current population of Monesen cannot support the number of retail and service establishments that it would take to occupy the existing buildings downtown. The EIP contained a downtown conceptual plan (shown on the right) that involved right-sizing the downtown to distinct sections.

Fight the cycle of disinvestment.

Businesses want to invest in a community that invests in itself. If Monessen wants to attract new businesses and developers, we need to demonstrate that we offer a high-quality of life and are willing to spend our limited resources in making our community a place worth living and working in.

Position our City as a place ready for investment.

To encourage new investment and make it an easier process, the City has an opportunity to update its land use regulations (zoning ordinance and subdivision and land development ordinance) in order to be more development-friendly. The City needs to consider how to make it an attractive place to do business - what can we offer that would make new businesses and developers choose to locate here instead of somewhere else?



Implementing Solutions.

Right-size Downtown Monessen.

Target new development to the core area within the downtown.

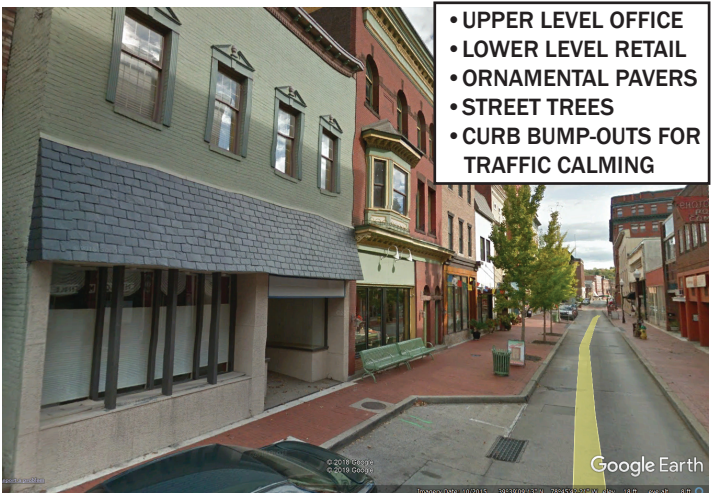
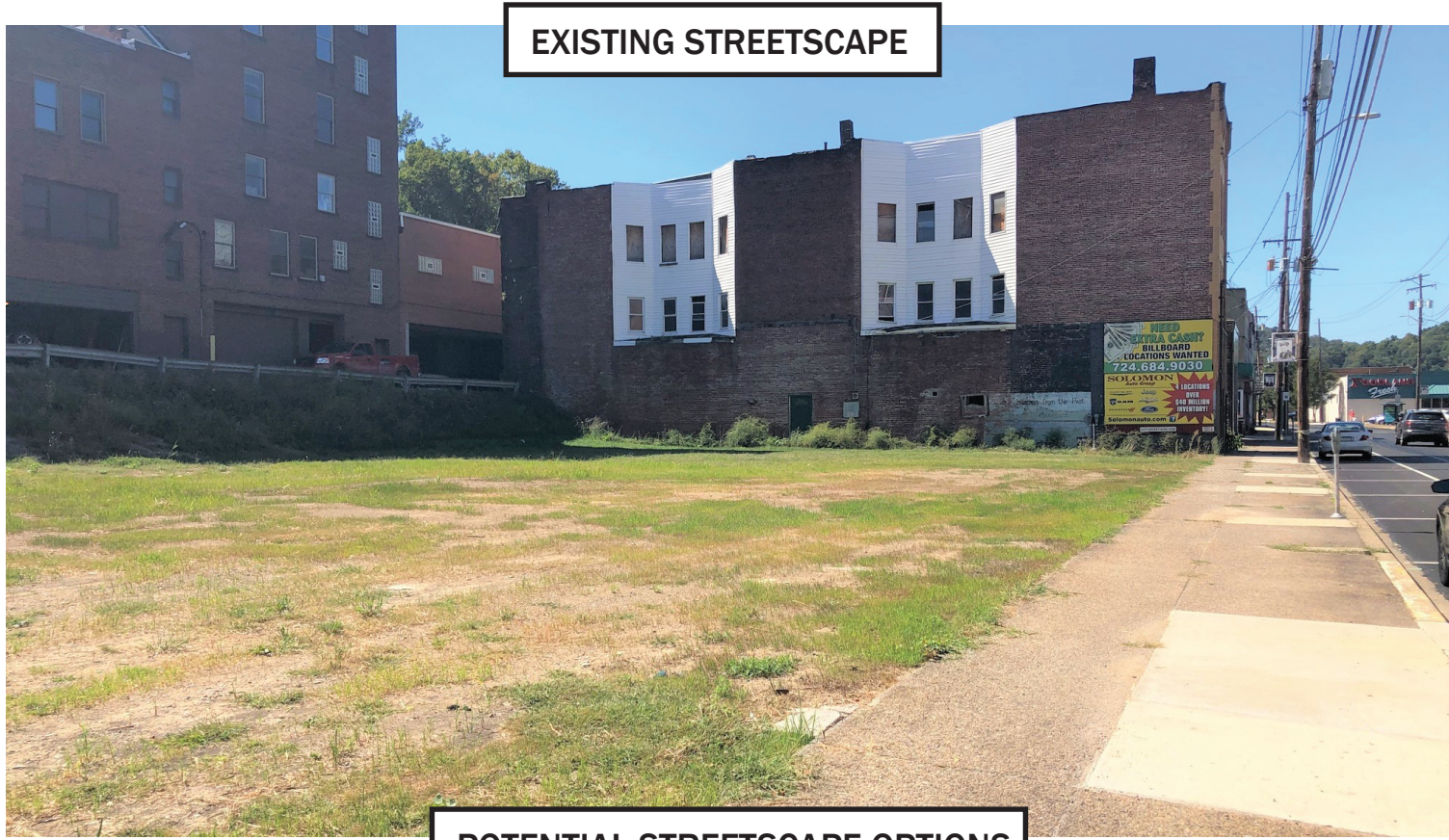
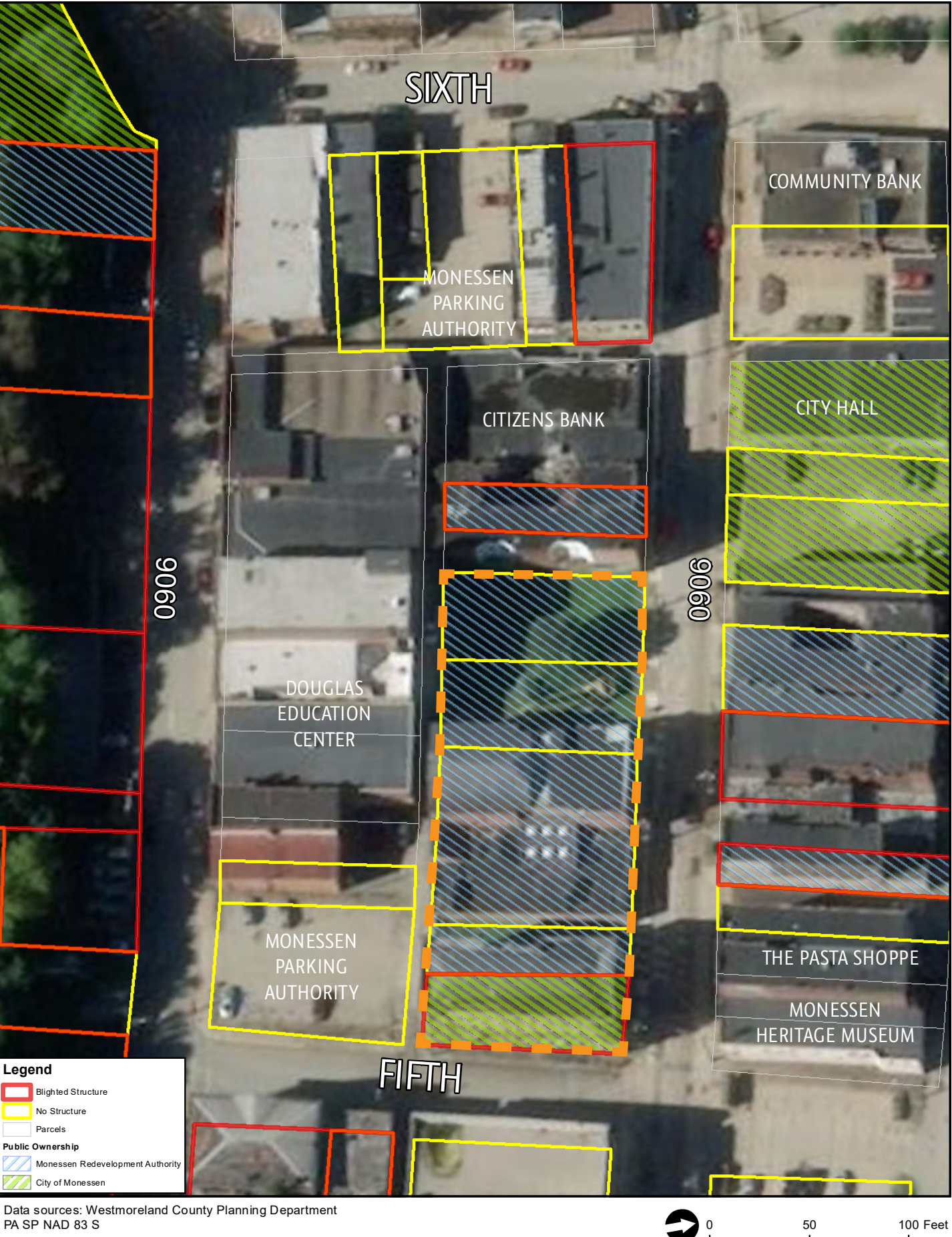
As shown in the EIP Conceptual Plan, the priority area for downtown revitalization needs to occur in a small area where incremental change will be magnified. The public repeatedly pointed to the 500 block of Donner Avenue as the top area for redevelopment. This block is anchored by Citizens Bank on one end and the former Health Mart, now a dilapidated structure, one of the worst in the City. In between, is almost entirely vacant land (with the exception of another blighted building next to Citizens Bank) owned by the Redevelopment Authority.

A vision board was created, as shown on page 37, to visually depict what this redevelopment block could look like.

Prioritize and maintain a list of properties that need to be either rehabilitated or demolished and develop public and private partnerships to plan for redevelopment.

The City could utilize the Westmoreland County Land Bank to help clear title and assemble development sites. At this time, the City is not a member; more information on the County Land Bank is provided on page 81. Key sites include

- 500 Donner Avenue
- Macqurey Building (3rd / Schoonmaker)
- 5th Ave Hotel
- The City parking garage
- The building across from Felicia’s restaurant
- The building across from the Salvation Army.



Update the Zoning Ordinance

The City enacted the zoning ordinance in 1998 (with some amendments over the years), dividing the City into the following districts, as shown on the zoning map to the right:

- » S Conservancy District -
- » R1 One Family Residence
- » R2 Two Family Residence
- » R3 Multiple Family Residence
- » C1 Neighborhood Shopping District
- » C2 Business District
- » M1 Planned Light Industrial District
- » M2 Heavy Industrial District

At more than 30 years old, the ordinance is due for a major update, which will allow the City to not only address necessary updates in accordance with the PA MPC and newer/ changing land uses (think: alternative energy, telecommunications facilities) but also implement the overall vision established by the Comprehensive Plan.

Some administrative/general items that the update should address include:

- Update the definitions and uses to address outdated terms and include uses not currently addressed. Remove regulations from the definitions - these should be addressed elsewhere in the ordinance.
- Provide a statement of intent or purpose for each zoning district, that clearly explains the purpose of that district and can be used as defense of allowing/denying special exceptions and/or conditional uses and other special circumstances.
- Create a digital map of the zoning ordinance and make it readily available online and at City Hall. Any resident, business owner or developer should be able to view a copy at any time.

More progressive approaches to consider include the following:

- **Create a “central business district” within the center of town.** Currently, the majority of the downtown is zoned C2. As recommended in the EIP, the City should create a more centralized business district (surrounding 5th Street) to become the heart of the downtown. Consider making this district a “pink zone” whereby development regulations are relaxed in favor of encourage redevelopment (see page 51 for more information).



Within this district, the City should reexamine the uses permitted to ensure that they are creating a vibrant downtown. Uses that do not support this vision should not be permitted (i.e. outdoor commercial recreation, campgrounds, kennel).

- **Eliminate off-street parking requirements.** While many cities and towns cite a perceived lack of parking as a barrier to new development, in reality, requiring parking minimums often works against the city by increasing the cost of development. As Strong Towns puts it, “Minimum parking requirements hinder the potential of Strong Towns by filling our cities with unproductive, empty parking spaces that don’t add value to our places. They push homes and businesses farther apart, impede the walkability of our neighborhoods, raise the cost of housing, and place an especially costly burden on small, local entrepreneurs. In the absence of parking minimums, we’ll still have parking—but we’ll be free to decide how much it’s worth to us and weigh its value against the other things we could do with the same finite, precious land. We’ll no longer be forced to build more parking than we really need.”¹
- **Allow for increased density.** Currently, the ordinance caps townhouse and low-rise apartments at no more than 15 dwelling units per acre. Townhouses are only permitted in the R3 and C2 districts; apartments are only permitted in the R3 and C2 districts by right and R1 as a conditional use.

Typically, residential districts increase in density - R1 is typically single-family homes one larger lots; R2 allows for smaller lots along with duplexes and townhouses and to provide a higher density; R3 would then allow all multifamily residential uses at an even higher density. Consider revising the residential zoning districts to follow this (currently, semi-detached units are permitted in R2 but townhouses are not and apartments are a conditional use in R1 but not R2).

In addition, the higher density residential areas should be found close to the downtown. This allows for more people to be closer to services and transit stops, increasing pedestrian traffic in downtown.

Allow accessory dwelling units (ADUs) as a permitted use by right in all zoning districts that allow single-family dwellings. Requirements can be included to address setbacks, density and height. ADUs can be an answer to housing affordability issues.

¹ “What’s wrong with parking minimums?” Strong Towns. Retrieved online at: <https://www.strongtowns.org/parking>

Pink Zoning. What is it and how could it help?

Pink Zoning involves reducing the red tape that is often a required hurdle for development to take place. The process and costs required to achieve local development can sometimes be a deterrent to developers leaving them to build where there are less restrictions. Additionally, it can make it nearly impossible for small-scale development to take place. By easing some of the constraints, small developers and entrepreneurs can open businesses and help revitalize their community. Pink Zones expedite the review and permitting processes for developers typically including revitalization in residential areas and support Main Street businesses and shared spaces.

Detroit is the leading city that is revamping traditional methods of zoning. Some of the changes they are implementing include:

- Allow by-right residential uses, loft, and multi-family above first floor commercial
- Require new commercial buildings to have street-facing doors and minimum 50% transparency between 3’ and 8’ above sidewalk
- Revise, reduce and/or remove front and rear setbacks
- Allow by-right light industrial uses (maker spaces)
- Remove parking as a by-right & eliminate minimum requirements for off-street parking
- Allow by-right use of pervious pavers and green infrastructure to manage stormwater on site
- Develop design guidelines emphasizing that all streets must be designed for pedestrians first, and must provide flexibility to accommodate rapidly changing transportation modes.
- Allow for flexible, district-based parking sharing.
- Incentivize localized revenue sharing from parking meters to support future development.
- Allow for stormwater-management swaps and trading of stormwater credits.
- Create targeted, wireless mesh networks within neighborhoods and as part of the public realm.
- Support local power generation, including solar, biodigestion, etc. and its application to the grid.
- Eliminate grandfathering policies.

<https://www.smithgroup.com/perspectives/2018/from-pink-zone-to-mix-tape>

Streamlining the Development Process

Developers and real estate agents like to work in communities in which the regulations are clear, concise and streamlined. Time is money. There are some ways that the development process could be streamlined to make it easier.

- Define and regulate minor subdivisions and land developments; applicants would be exempt from the preliminary plan review period, reducing the approval process by half.
 - » A subdivision of up to a certain number of lots that involves no new infrastructure. The number of lots is up to the municipality, based on how flexible it wants to be.
 - » The improvement of one lot of less than 20,000 square feet in area for one multifamily residential building or a group of two or more residential or nonresidential buildings.
 - » The improvement of one lot of less than 10,000 square feet for one nonresidential building, regardless of the number of tenants.
 - » Any change of use, addition to or structural enlargement of a nonresidential structure which results in either an increase in the gross floor area of the principal building of less than 1,500 square feet or an increase in the gross floor area of the principal building and the paved area of the lot which, in combination, is less than 1,500 square feet.
 - » The division or allocation of land or space among two or more occupants by leasehold or condominium.
- Allow for a one-time exemption from the land development review process for any addition to or structural enlargement of a nonresidential structure which results in an increase in the gross floor area of the principal building of 500 square feet or less.
- Provide for a fast track approval process, in which not only are plans subject to a combined preliminary and final approval process, but applications bypass the Planning Commission and go straight to Council, thus reducing the approval process even more.
 - » A lot (lots) consolidation (reverse subdivision).
 - » A subdivision involving a lot line change between two existing lots that will result in only two lots, where all lots lie within the same zoning district, where the resulting lots conform to Zoning Ordinance requirements, and where the size of no lot increases or decreases by more than the minimum lot size of the respective zoning district in which it is situated.
 - » The final subdivision of dwelling unit lots, whether condominium or townhouse construction. Each newly formed lot must conform to the bulk and area requirements of the zoning district in which it is situated.
 - » An addition that is 1,000 square feet or less than or equal to 10% of the principal structure shown on the most recent approved site plan, whichever is less.
 - » Expansion of a parking lot that is 10% or less than the parking approved through the last land development approved, where no change is proposed in terms of site access and circulation.

- **Reduce required setback and buffers.** Townhouses and low-rise apartments have a required 20 foot buffer from all other principal buildings. In high density districts, this is an unnecessary requirement that increases the lot area needed to accommodate the use and needlessly separates it from adjacent buildings. In addition, there is a required 50 foot setback from existing streets and 25 feet from new streets within the development.
- **Allow for planned residential developments.** The purpose of Planned Residential Development (PRD) regulations in urban areas is to foster the creation of new and the revitalization of existing neighborhoods in the compact, traditional grid pattern of established neighborhoods. The PRD regulations emphasize the creation of walkable neighborhoods that are compact and development that is sensitive to a site's environmental features, while also providing housing and transportation choices and usable open space. Urban communities use the PRD to encourage redevelopment by making the process simpler and providing relief and/or incentives (density, uses) that the underlying district does not. The minimum area for a PRD varies greatly amongst communities, but some are less than an acre or as small as ten contiguous lots.

Streamline the Development Process.

This is an opportunity for the City to think outside the box when it comes to land use regulations. Progressive and flexible regulations could be the key to jumpstarting development by removing barriers that impede forward-thinking developers. The County Plan recommends that communities update policies and regulations to remove barriers to the development process, particularly in downtown areas.

The City has a subdivision and land development ordinance, which regulates how development is laid out. Requiring developers to go through a preliminary and final approval process is costly and time consuming. By providing provisions for minor subdivisions and land developments, the City can simplify the process and cut the approval process in half. See page 43 for more information.

Provide pad-ready development sites.

Prepare requests for proposals (RFP) for key publicly-owned sites for redevelopment.

The developer request for proposal (RFP) is the primary way that communities engage private developers in local development project ideas. Some things to consider when engaging potential developers:¹

- 1. Demonstrate the community vision. Use the Comprehensive Plan, the EIP and/ or any other pertinent plans to highlight how the vision for the site has the community support.
- 2. Show the market suport. Demonstrate that the a developer’s project will be successful here - conduct market research to demonstrate the demand for the desired uses.
- 3. Get the site development-ready. A site and project should be ready for the developer to step into - site control and zoning should be in line with the project.
- 4. Include a letter of invitation. An invitation from the Mayor and/or Council to introduce the RFP is an opportunity to demonstrate that the elected officials support the project.
- 5. Understand the financials. Most development projects will require some form of public assistance, which can range from reduced land cost, provision of infrastructure, tax abatements, expedited permitting.
- 6. Be specific but invite creativity. The RFP should clearly state the vision, but allow for flexibility to achieve that vision.
- 7. Cover the basics. Make sure the RFP includes the basics, such as property details, deadlines, submission requirements, etc. See page 45 for more information.
- 8. Actively recruit. Be actively engaged in marketing the RFP - explore third-party posting opportunities, contact local and regional developers, etc.
- 9. Think ahead to the next proejct. Collect contact information and keep on file for the next RFP/development project. Stay in touch.

¹ <https://www.camoinassociates.com/10-tips-and-tricks-preparing-developer-rfp-strategies-maximize-developer-interest-your-site-and>

Developer Requirements

The City should prepare requests for proposals (RFP) for key publicly-owned sites for redevelopment. At a minimum, the City should require prospective developers to submit the following:

- 1. Project Narrative**
 - a. Description of development plan for the selected parcel(s) including number of units and / or rentable square feet
 - b. Describe proposed density (please submit a sketch as an attachment)
 - c. Describe income and use mix
 - d. Explain ownership entity
 - e. Prospective development timeline
 - f. Discussion of parking needs
- 2. Relevant Development Experience**
 - a. Brief description of similar projects (date, location, concept)
 - b. Photographs of projects
 - c. Description and role of development entity
 - d. References- strong references include banks, municipal entities, co developers, tenants, and press clippings that include project narratives to describe previous work
 - e. Brief description of community engagement in previous projects
- 3. Financial Capacity**
 - a. Detailed description of ability to finance the costs associated with project
 - b. Explanation of the Developer’s previous experience in attracting equity investors
 - c. Identify the people or entities in the proposed development team, including all joint venture, general, or limited partners, and percentage of interest
 - d. Role of each development partner and major consultant in the implementation of the development plan
- 4. Budgets**
 - a. Preliminary development budget including proposed list of financing sources and project uses, including acquisition costs
 - b. Prospective Construction budget

Determine the feasibility of creating a tax increment financing district (TIF).

Tax increment financing (TIF) allows for the capture of increases in real property taxes resulting from new development to pay for public improvements like necessary infrastructure. All or a portion of new tax revenues generated above the initial tax base can be diverted to fund eligible project costs. Nonrecourse debt, typically a revenue bond, is issued via an eligible authority of the sponsoring municipality to provide upfront financing. Alternatively, investments can be reimbursed from the flow of annual tax revenues diverted and captured within the district ('pay-as-you-go' method). The City should explore the cost/benefit of and feasibility of (the County and school district would need to agree to participate) to establish a TIF district in the downtown.

If the City creates a TIF, it could be eligible for the TIF Guarantee Program through the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development (PA DCED). This program "provides credit enhancement for TIF projects to improve market access and lower capital costs through the use of guarantees to issuers of bonds or other indebtedness." More information on this program can be found at <https://dced.pa.gov/programs/tax-increment-financing-tif-guarantee-program/>.

Support small businesses and encourage entrepreneurs.

Vacant buildings can be redeveloped to provide flexible and inexpensive workspace. Shared access to capital-intensive equipment can enable the growth of small scale manufacturers. Co-working spaces can be started as a commercial venture by individuals or created and run by the local government or nonprofits. Typically, co-working spaces use a membership model to fund the space, with monthly or drop-in memberships available. Required elements include open working areas with desks/tables/chairs; power outlets; strong wifi; and common spaces such as a conference room.

Another option is to encourage the creation of a makerspace or entrepreneurial center, perhaps through a partnership with the Douglas Education Center, Library, Monessen School District or other local organizations. Makerspaces differ in that they provide the tools necessary for people to actually create things. See page 47 for more information.

Case Study: The Corner Launchbox

The Corner Launchbox program and coworking space concepts were made possible in part by a seed grant of \$150,000 from Invent Penn State, a Commonwealth-wide initiative to spur economic development, job creation and student career success, and a partnership with Westmoreland County. Penn State New Kensington used the grant to create a unique model that melds entrepreneurship, coworking space and community-driven economic development to revitalize the city. The result is the first center of its kind in Westmoreland County with the goal of being a hub of collaboration, creation and innovation in New Kensington.

The Corner provides access to The Corner Launchbox entrepreneurial programming, as well as active, membership-driven coworking space, operated by Pittsburgh's Beauty Shoppe, which also manages locations in Pittsburgh and Cleveland, Ohio. Individuals and small businesses are able to purchase memberships based on their needs. Various amenities such as open, shared coworking space, office space, internet access, conference rooms and printing are available.

Entrepreneurial development at The Corner is anchored by LaunchBox™ programming. Launchbox is a 10-week training session designed to provide the resources and support that entrepreneurs need to go from idea to market.

Throughout the year, The Corner also hosts a variety of entrepreneurial workshops, series and networking events for entrepreneurs and aspiring entrepreneurs.

More information about The Corner can be found at newkensington.psu.edu/launchbox.

What is makerspace?

A makerspace is a collaborative work space inside a school, library or separate public/private facility for making, learning, exploring and sharing that uses high tech to no tech tools. These spaces are open to kids, adults, and entrepreneurs and have a variety of maker equipment including (but not required) 3D printers, laser cutters, cnc machines, soldering irons and even sewing machines. These spaces are also helping to prepare those who need the critical 21st century skills in the fields of science, technology, engineering and math (STEM). They provide hands on learning, help with critical thinking skills and even boost self-confidence. Makerspaces are also fostering entrepreneurship and are being utilized as incubators and accelerators for business startups.

Source: <https://www.makerspaces.com/what-is-a-makerspace/>

Enhance multi-modal transportation options.

Lobby the MMVTA to expand bus service.

The Mid Mon Valley Transit Authority provides commuter connections between Downtown Pittsburgh and multiple Mon Valley communities including Monessen. Within the City, there are 7 bus stops and bike racks are available near transit stops at Foodloand, Exxon and Keystone Bakery. There are several routes that provide service to Monessen. The Commuter A route runs from Donora to the City of Pittsburgh. Commuter Express Routes 2 and 3 provide expedited service by adding non-stop commutes into Pittsburgh. The Local 3 and Weekender 1 routes provide service solely between the local Mon Valley communities.

While residents were thankful for the service to Pittsburgh and local areas, one of the concerns was that there is no public transportation to other regional destinations, such as Greensburg and Washington. Although the City does not operate the MMVTA, they can lobby them to determine the feasibility of providing service to these areas, possibly connecting with other transit operators for service to outlying regions.



Implement the bicycle and pedestrian plan from the EIP Special Conditions Report.

Almost every community wants the same thing - to attract high-paying jobs that can not only support existing residents but also attract new ones. Monessen’s industrial history is based almost exclusively on its location along the Monongahela River and abundance of minerals. Today’s economy is changing. Companies are less dependent on location and can go to where the talent lives. The talent is increasingly living in walkable downtowns that offer the amenities they are looking for as opposed to living close to their jobs. People are more transient than ever - partly due to cars and transit but also because of increasing flexibility with jobs. Many people work remotely and don’t even have to go into an office. Others are self-employed and work anywhere they want. A New York Post article in 2018

noted that self-employed professionals, defined as those whose primary income is from independent client-based work, will approach 33% of the workforce in coming years. An estimated 27 million Americans will leave full-time jobs between by 2020.¹

Address failing infrastructure.

Implement the 2017 Corrective Action Plan.

The Mon Valley Sewage Authority sewer system was constructed in 1968-70 to intercept and treat wastewater from the combined sewer systems (CSS) owned and operated by the City of Monessen and the Borough of Donora, as well as Carroll Township. The City owns and maintains its own lines. The City last completed a Corrective Action Plan in 2017, which outlines failing lines and priority improvement areas.

Adopt a multi-year street maintenance plan.

Like many older, urban communities, the City is going to be faced with expensive improvement options to address the failing infrastructure. The City does not have a road maintenance plan in place, but it needs one in order to prioritize and track road improvement projects. While creating the multi-year plan, the City needs to align these improvements with water/sewer line replacement projects.

At some point, if things do not change financially for the City, they may be faced with even harder choices. For example, St. Paul , Minnesota, has a huge maintenance funding problem. A 2018 Pioneer Press article stated that St. Paul’s repair funding at the time covered “about eight miles per year out of 850 miles of city streets.” This equates to needing 106 years to repair every street citywide (knowing full well that the life-span for a road is not 106 years).² This leaves the City in a constant state of road triage - fixing the immediate problems but never fully fixing the underlying issues.

A more progressive, but perhaps necessary, approach is to reduce the amount of infrastructure the City has to maintain. As the City takes on a redevelopment plan (see page 82 for more information) and starts making these hard choices about blighted buildings to demolish and what neighborhoods to invest in, it will also need to consider doing the same for infrastructure improvements.

1 <https://nypost.com/2018/03/25/self-employment-is-a-rising-trend-in-the-american-workforce/>
2 <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2020/2/24/when-is-it-time-to-pull-the-plug-on-a-budget-busting-road>

Some may say that investing in public spaces and/or aesthetic improvements is a waste of scarce resources. But the reality is, businesses want to invest in a community that will be attractive to their employees to live and work. Reimagining Our Westmoreland recommends the following strategies, which the City should embrace:

- Improve public spaces.*

- Consider closing one of the side streets and turning into a greenway/pedestrian-only street (see page 52-53 for more information).
- Create greenspace along Schoonmaker – 6th to Parente Boulevard.
- Work with the School District (and other organizations) to create murals/public art. Potential sites to consider include the blank wall on the municipal building adjacent to the parking lot and the wall on Schoonmaker Avenue by the metered parking lot.
- Design and implement streetscape improvements per the EIP. Start at the 500 block of Donner and work out.
- Design and implement gateway improvements per the EIP.

What is placemaking? The Project for Public Spaces (PPS) defines placemaking as “Placemaking inspires people to collectively reimagine and reinvent public spaces as the heart of every community. More than just promoting better urban design, placemaking facilitates creative patterns of use, paying particular attention to the physical, cultural, and social identities that define a place and support its ongoing evolution.”¹

- In evaluating thousands of public spaces around the world, PPS has found that to be successful, they generally share the following four qualities:

1 “What is Placemaking?” Project for Public Spaces. Retrieved online <https://www.pps.org/category/placemaking>.

WHAT MAKES A PLACE?

KEY ATTRIBUTES (Red circle)

INTANGIBLES (Orange circle)

MEASUREMENTS (Light orange circle)

PLACE

SOCIABILITY

- NUMBER OF WOMEN, CHILDREN & ELDERLY
- SOCIAL NETWORKS
- VOLUNTEERISM
- EVENING USE
- STREET LIFE
- WELCOMING
- INTERACTIVE
- FRIENDLY
- PRIDE
- NEIGHBORLY
- COOPERATIVE
- STEWARDSHIP
- DIVERSE

USES & ACTIVITIES

- LOCAL BUSINESS OWNERSHIP
- LAND USE PATTERNS
- PROPERTY VALUES
- RENT LEVELS
- RETAIL SALES
- SUSTAINABLE
- CELEBRATORY
- INDIGENOUS
- USEFUL
- REAL
- SPECIAL
- VITAL
- ACTIVE
- FUN

ACCESS & LINKAGES

- CONTINUITY
- PROXIMITY
- CONNECTED
- READABLE
- WALKABLE
- CONVENIENT
- ACCESSIBLE
- PARKING USAGE PATTERNS
- PEDESTRIAN ACTIVITY
- TRANSIT USAGE
- MODE SPLITS
- TRAFFIC DATA

COMFORT & IMAGE

- SAFE
- CLEAN
- "GREEN"
- WALKABLE
- SITTABLE
- SPIRITUAL
- CHARMING
- ATTRACTIVE
- HISTORIC
- ENVIRONMENTAL DATA
- BUILDING CONDITIONS
- SANITATION RATING
- CRIME STATISTICS

Creating a Pedestrian Greenway

The concept of establishing a small greenway in the downtown was brought up at one of the public meetings. Based on traffic flow and connections between the downtown and neighborhoods, 5th Street is the best option. It is also adjacent to the top priority redevelopment site (the 500 block of Donner Avenue). The vision for the redevelopment of this block includes multi-story mixed use such as retail (restaurants, coffee shops, etc.) on the ground floor with office space and/or apartments above. In addition, the Douglas Education Center occupies many of the buildings on Schoonmaker Avenue. Re-imagining 5th Street as a greenway would provide that open space for students, pedestrians and bicyclists to utilize and create an attractive connection between the two Main Streets in town.

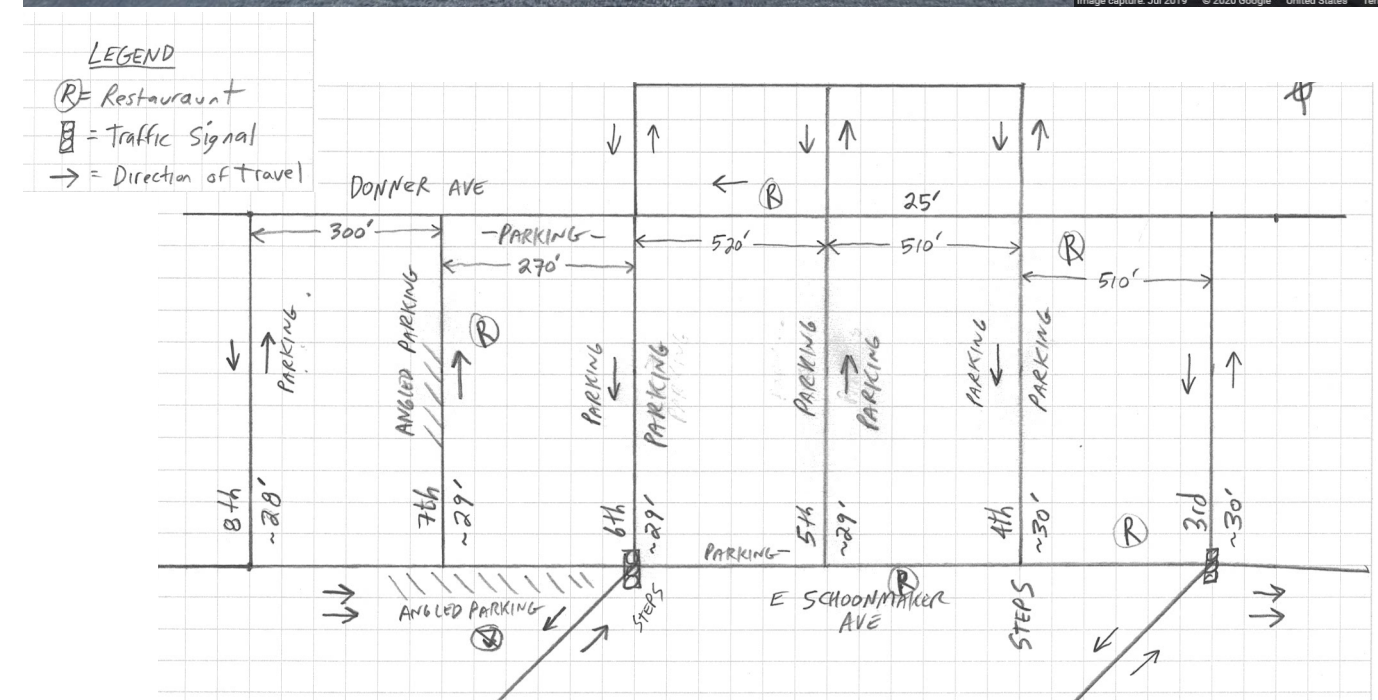
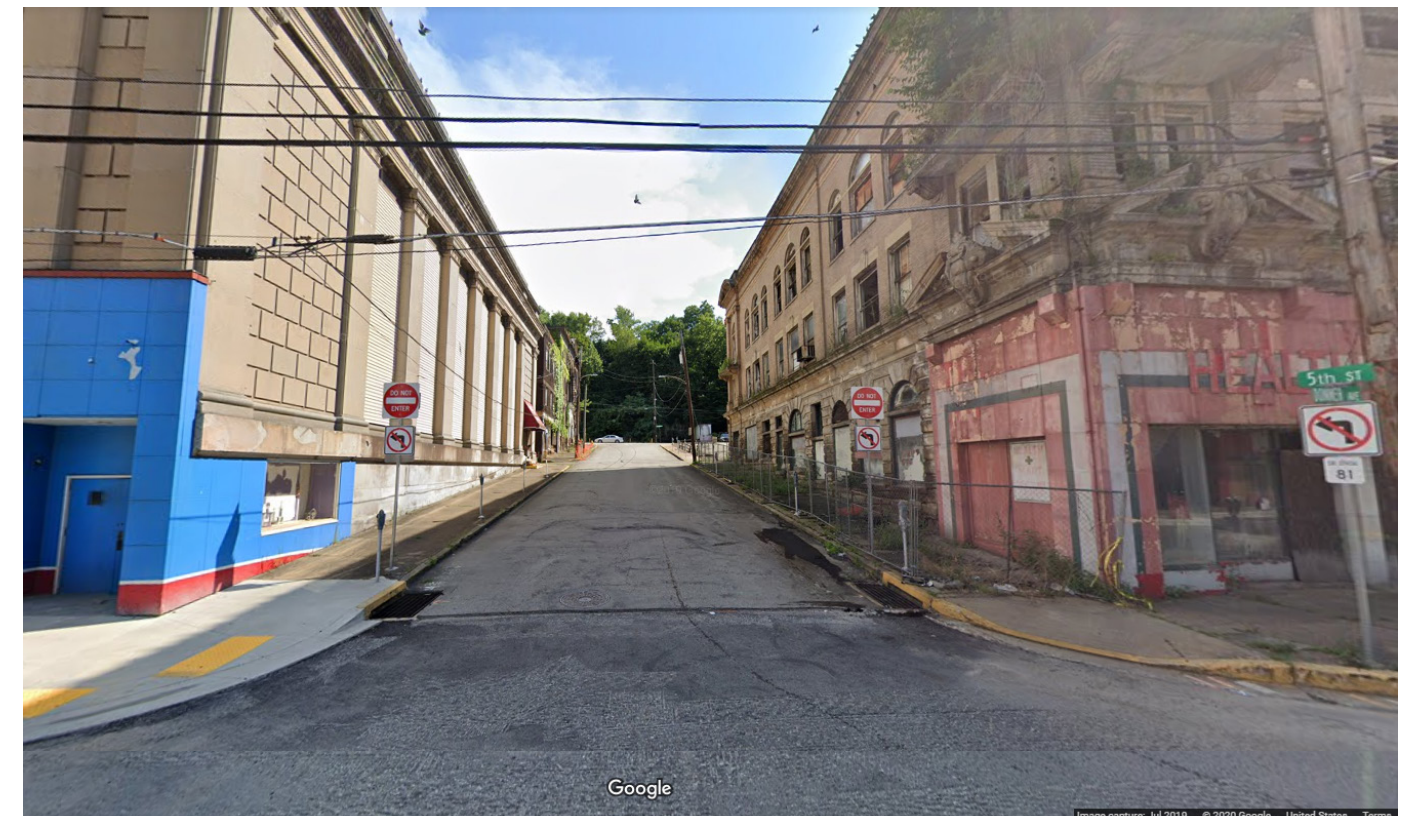
From a traffic perspective, there would be minimal impact in converting 5th Street to a pedestrian street, as there are extremely low traffic volumes on 4th, 5th and 6th Streets. However, the following options are available for changes to vehicular traffic if 5th Street is converted to pedestrian only:

Option 1: Do nothing. Although 4th Street and 6th Street would both be one-way southbound, 4th Street is only 510 feet from 5th Street, while 6th Street is only 520 feet. These are acceptable distances for traffic to remain as is with the closure of 5th Street.

Option 2: Convert 4th Street to one-way northbound. 6th Street is one-way southbound so converting 4th Street to northbound would alternate the directions.

Option 3: Convert 4th Street to two-way traffic. It is approximately 30 feet curb to curb, so if metered parking were removed on one side, there could be two 11-foot travel lanes and an 8-foot parking lane. There appears to be 5 metered parking spaces along the eastern side of 4th Street and 7 metered parking spaces along the western side. Eliminating parking along the eastern side, only 5 parking spaces would be lost. There appears to be plenty of available parking along Donner Avenue and E Schoonmaker Avenue, as well as an open lot at the corner of 4th St and E Schoonmaker Ave to accommodate the loss of these 5 spaces. If the decision is made to convert 4th Street from one-way to two-way, PennDOT recommends the following procedure:

- Notify the general public by news media and abutting residences and/or businesses by direct mail about 30 days prior to the effective date.
- Provide adequate sight distance at all intersections and driveways by removing parking, clearing vegetation, etc. Prohibit parking on the left side of the one-way street.
- Install and cover Two-Way Traffic (W6-3) signs on both sides of the existing one-way street at its beginning and immediately beyond all intersections where major left turning movements occur. Also, install and cover Two-Way Traffic (W6-3) signs on all major approaches to the existing one-way street, but rotated 90 degrees to graphically depict traffic going both left to right and right to left.



- Eradicate any pavement markings on the one-way street or side street approaches which will be in conflict with the new two-way operation. Install centerlines on the "one-way" street.
- On the agreed upon date, uncover the Two-Way Traffic (W6-3) signs, and remove any nonapplicable One-Way signs, BEGIN ONE-WAY (R6-12) signs or turn restriction signs. Install appropriate pavement marking arrows as appropriate.
- At least 3 months after the conversion, remove the Two-Way Traffic (W6-3) signs.

Implement a wayfinding signage program.

Wayfinding is not just signage. Architectural clues are also part of it. Implementing a thematic wayfinding program would help to orient visitors that they have “arrived.” This concept should be used Citywide to develop and utilize a thematic branding approach so that all City-owned parks/land are similarly signed and directional signage is installed to direct visitors to key attractions.

Wayfinding signage should be installed at key intersections to direct visitors to key



Examples of recommended branding and signage by Main Street Fairmont for the City of Fairmont, West Virginia attractions/destinations. Within the downtown, the signage should be oriented to pedestrians and cyclists.

Promote and utilize the boat launch more.

While most of the City’s riverfront property is occupied by heavy industry, the City does have the Herman Mihalich Memorial River Launch, located off of Monongahela Street at the eastern edge of downtown. We recommend that the City enhance the entrance from 906 (see rendering on page 57) to make it more visible and utilize it to host events, such as food trucks rallies, outdoor concerts, etc.

Food Truck Park

One way to utilize the boat launch more would be to develop a food truck event. Increasing in popularity, food truck events offer a great way to utilize existing space off-hours while bringing in a variety of local and regional vendors to support local businesses.

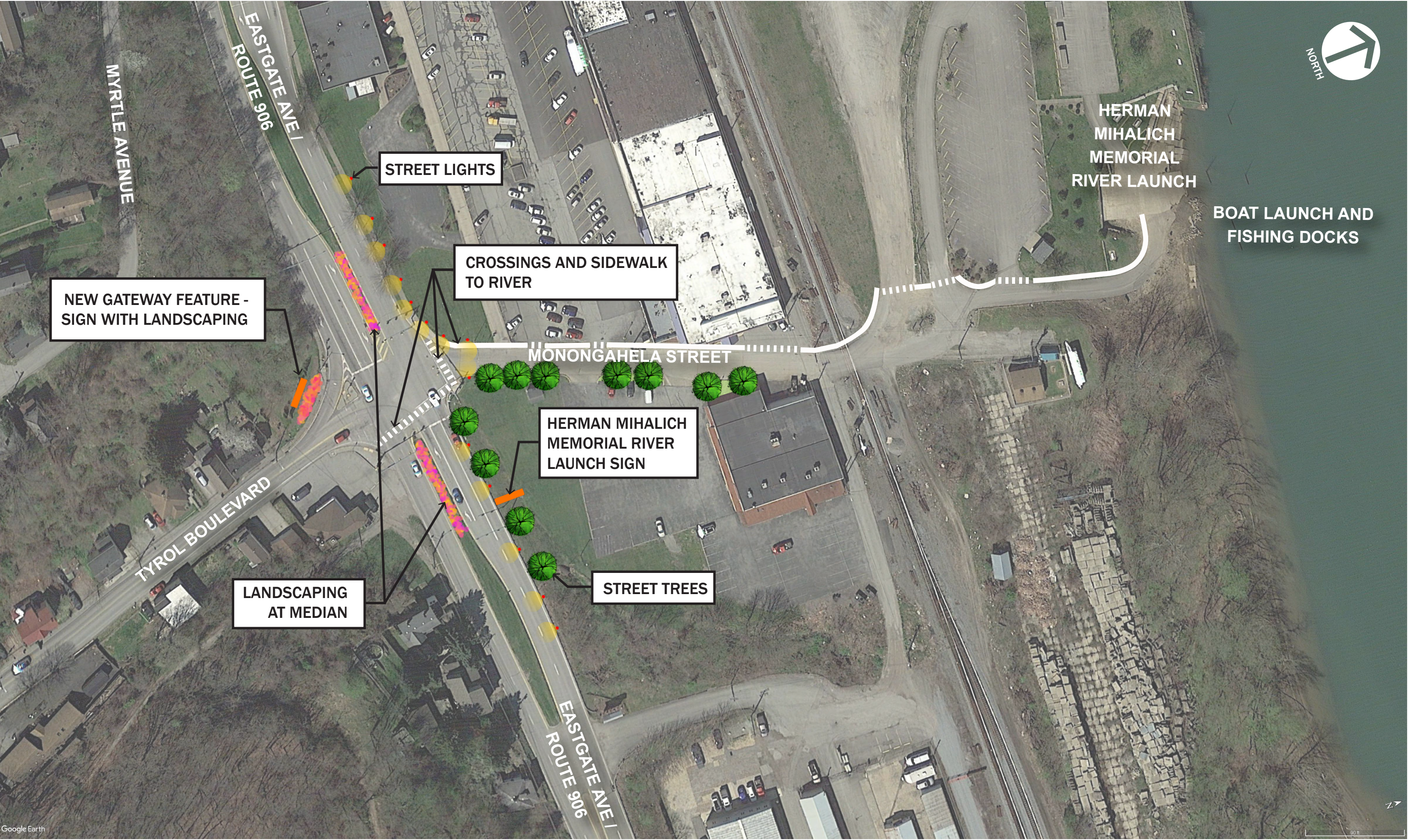
A great example of this being done is the Pittsburgh Food Truck Park. Located in the Millvale Riverfront Park and on the Three Rivers Heritage Trail, the Pittsburgh Food Truck Park featured a rotation of the area’s favorite mobile food vendors, a beer garden, a performance venue, an event space and game yard.



Source: <https://www.pittsburghfoodpark.com/>



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MONESSEN Priority Goal 2: Eliminate Blight.

Blight.

This word was pervasive during the planning process. Everyone talked about it. Complained about it. Pointed it out. Identified it as one of the priority concerns that is debilitating Monessen. Blight is the most obvious problem facing Monessen. The downtown isn't just littered with vacant storefronts, there are buildings with no roofs and trees growing through the windows. The City has a housing vacancy rate of 21%. Neighborhoods are threatened by burned out abandoned homes.

The cost of blight is high. As the County Plan notes, "Blighted buildings are not only a safety risk, but they also decrease property values and diminish the aesthetic of a community. Lower property values correlate to a smaller tax base and less funding to provide and maintain necessary services." Worse yet, blight deters new residents from moving into a community.

The City's vision for its neighborhoods mirrors that of the County's - whereby "every neighborhood in the County is vibrant and free of blight, where people choose to purchase or rent homes and have the resources and knowledge to maintain their properties."

"Both people and land lie at the heart of community. It is the people who create the relationships, the dreams, the spirit, and the culture. It is the land that creates the place and the space. As human relationships are constantly evolving through times of nurture and growth and times of conflict and discord, so too are our uses of land. We are dependent on other people, yet we are also dependent on land. We are stewards of land, and it supports and protects us; we neglect and abuse land, and it soon mirrors our fractured community."

— Frank S. Alexander, Sam Nunn Professor of Law at Emory University School of Law and cofounder of the Center for Community Progress

Defining the Problem.

While the local officials may have had varying opinions on how to tackle the blight, there has always been a consensus that it needs to be addressed. At the onset of the comprehensive planning process, one of the priorities included in the scope of work was to prepare a plan to fight the blight. City Council committed to making this a top priority as part of the comprehensive plan.

Reimagining Our Westmoreland, the County’s Comprehensive Plan, recommends the following to eliminate blight:

- *Implement a blight plan. Utilize the “We Can DO This! A Five-Step, Fast-Track Blight Plan.*
- *Utilize Planning Tools. Promote and utilize various planning tools to address blight.*
- *Maintain Progress. Review and update databases and plans to monitor and address blight.*

The City’s Early Intervention Plan recommended that the following to address blight and vacant properties:

Recommendation N1 - Create a Blight and Vacant Property Committee to develop a focus and strategy for addressing blight in the commercial and residential areas. The Committee should be staffed by City personnel and should use the publication “From Blight to Bright” as a guiding source for action in the community.

We utilized both publications: the Five-Step Plan was used as a guide for the planning process while the Blight to Bright Plan was used to assist with recommendations.

Blight Inventory - where are the problem properties?

While preparing the scope of work for the City’s Comprehensive Plan, the Westmoreland County Department of Planning and Development offered to assist our efforts by developing a Blight Inventory and Mapping Project (BLIMP) for the City. The purpose of creating the BLIMP was to support a data-driven, progressive-discipline effort to approach addressing blight. The County performed the following tasks:

County and Planning Team staff met with key stakeholders that have data and information

But first, what exactly is blight?

Following with the recommendations of the Housing Alliance of Pennsylvania, we use the definition of blight from Pennsylvania’s Urban Redevelopment Law.

35 P.S. § 1712.1 (c) Blighted property shall include:

- (1) Any premises which because of physical condition or use is regarded as a public nuisance at common law or has been declared a public nuisance in accordance with the local housing, building, plumbing, fire and related codes.
- (2) Any premises which because of physical condition, use or occupancy is considered an attractive nuisance to children, including but not limited to abandoned wells, shafts, basements, excavations, and unsafe fences or structures.
- (3) Any dwelling which because it is dilapidated, unsanitary, unsafe, vermin-infested or lacking in the facilities and equipment required by the housing code of the municipality, has been designated by the department responsible for enforcement of the code as unfit for human habitation.
- (4) Any structure which is a fire hazard, or is otherwise dangerous to the safety of persons or property.
- (5) Any structure from which the utilities, plumbing, heating, sewerage or other facilities have been disconnected, destroyed, removed, or rendered ineffective so that the property is unfit for its intended use.
- (6) Any vacant or unimproved lot or parcel of ground in a predominantly built-up neighborhood, which by reason of neglect or lack of maintenance has become a place for accumulation of trash and debris, or a haven for rodents or other vermin.
- (7) Any unoccupied property which has been tax delinquent for a period of two years prior to the effective date of this act, and those in the future having a two-year tax delinquency.
- (8) Any property which is vacant but not tax delinquent, which has not been rehabilitated within one year of the receipt of notice to rehabilitate from the appropriate code enforcement agency.
- (9) Any abandoned property. A property shall be considered abandoned if:
 - (i) it is a vacant or unimproved lot or parcel of ground on which a municipal lien for the cost of demolition of any structure located on the property remains unpaid for a period of six months;
 - (ii) it is a vacant property or vacant or unimproved lot or parcel of ground on which the total of municipal liens on the property for tax or any other type of claim of the municipality are in excess of 150% of the fair market value of the property as established by the Board of Revisions of Taxes or other body with legal authority to determine the taxable value of the property; or
 - (iii) the property has been declared abandoned by the owner, including an estate that is in possession of the property.

related to blight, which included City Council members, the City’s Police Chief, the Fire Chief, Public Works Department Head and the Code Enforcement Officer. After collecting all of the information and creating a database, County staff developed a series of GIS mapping and utilized ArcView Story Map that allows the information to be viewed online. The County created the platform to allow the data to be updated and utilized by the City to inform them on decision-making regarding blight. Screen captures of the maps created by the County are included on the following pages.

Blight Inventory - County planning Staff conducted a street-level parcel inventory in the spring of 2019 of over 5,000 parcels in the City and assigned a grade of “good,” “fair” or “poor” based on a set of criteria for each grade. Staff collected photographs of all parcels that were assigned a poor grade. Parcels with and without structures were inventoried and graded.

Parcel Inventory Grading System



Good

- New construction/renovation
- Well maintained and cared for; no visible signs of deterioration
- Needs minor painting/basic improvements
- Some cleaning may be necessary
- Empty lot with no major visible debris (tires, trash, abandoned objects)



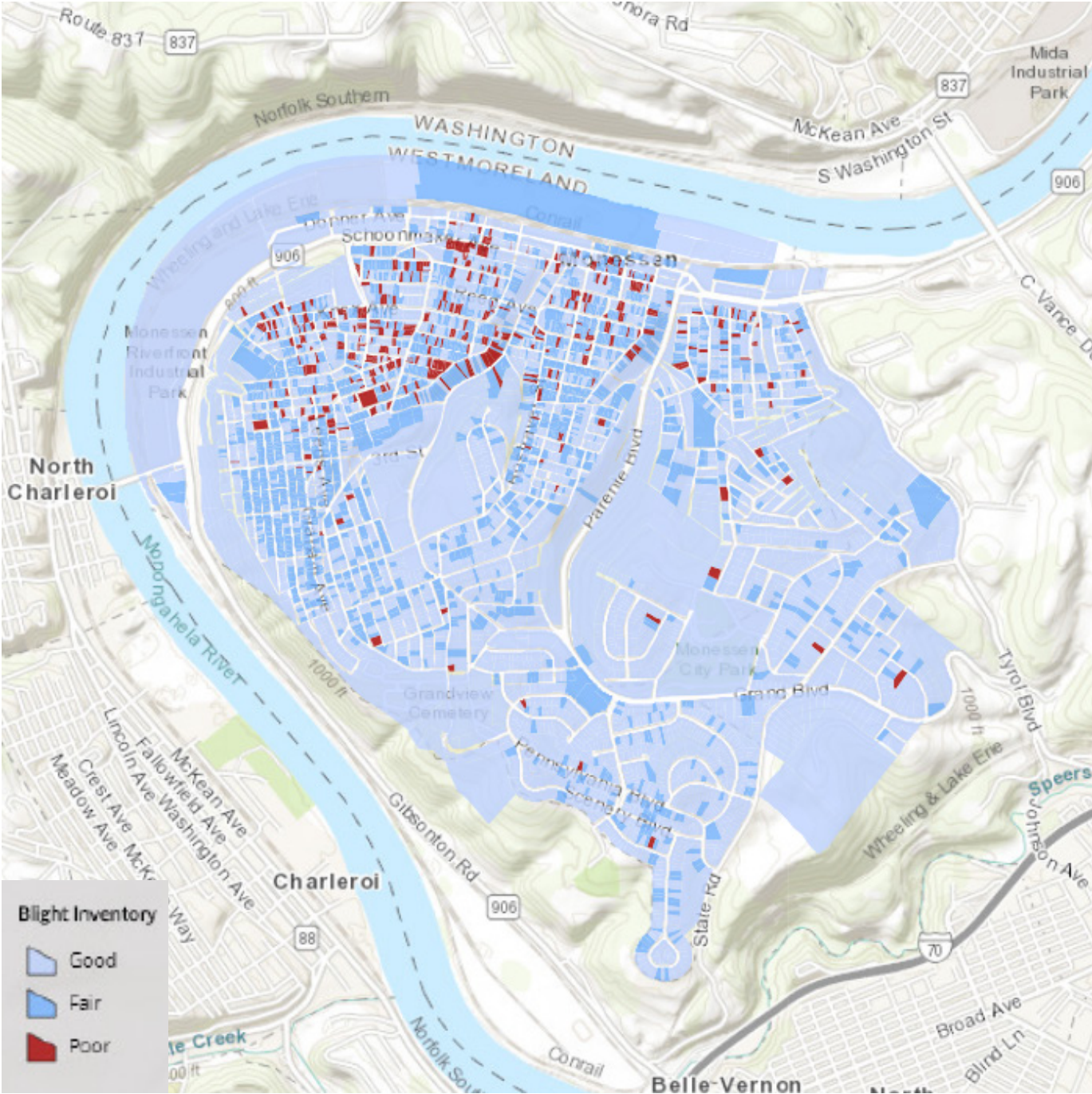
Fair

- Some cracking of brick or wood
- Major painting required
- Deteriorated cornice; Crumbling concrete
- Cracked windows or stairs
- Empty lot with some visible debris

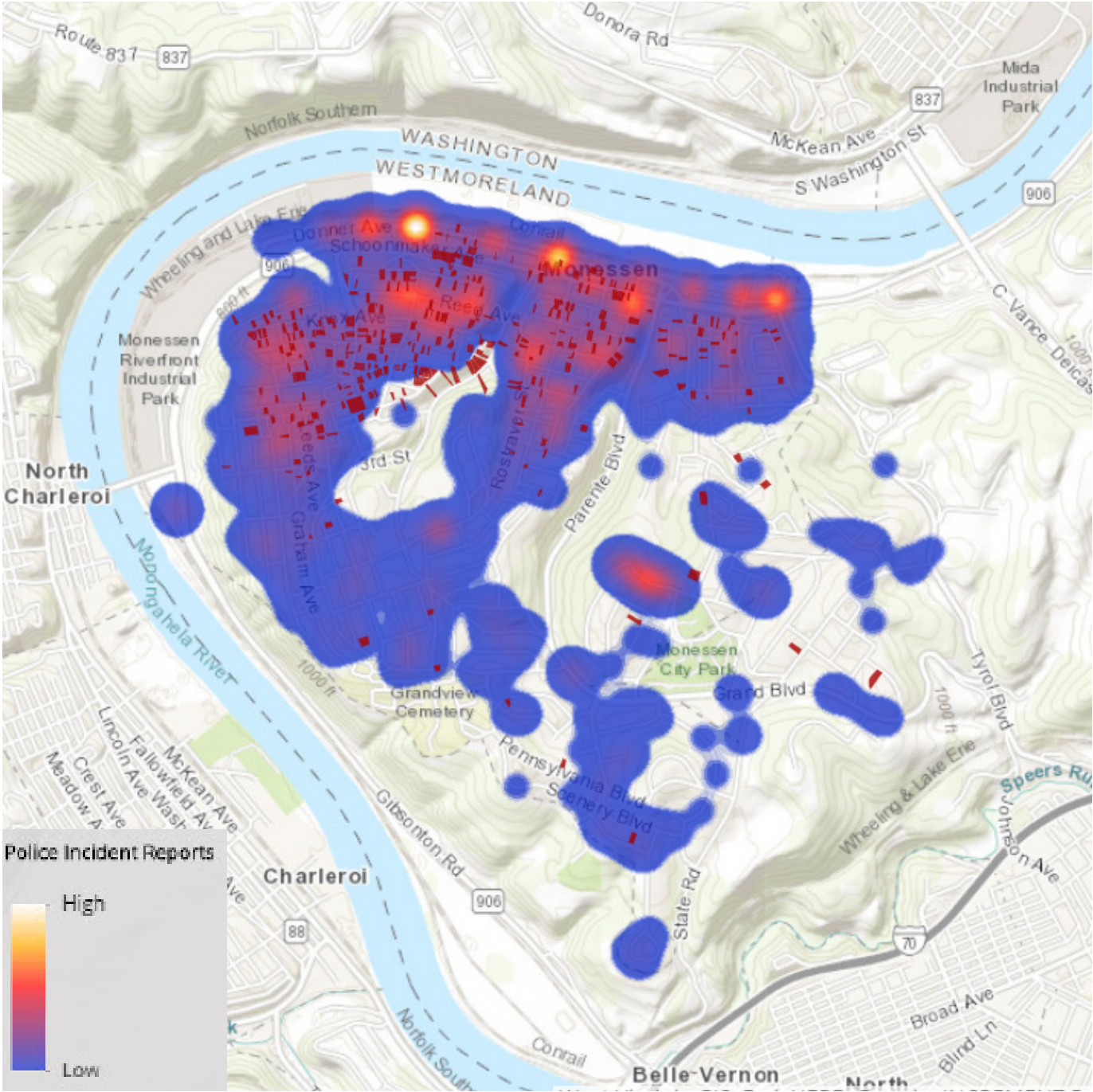


Poor

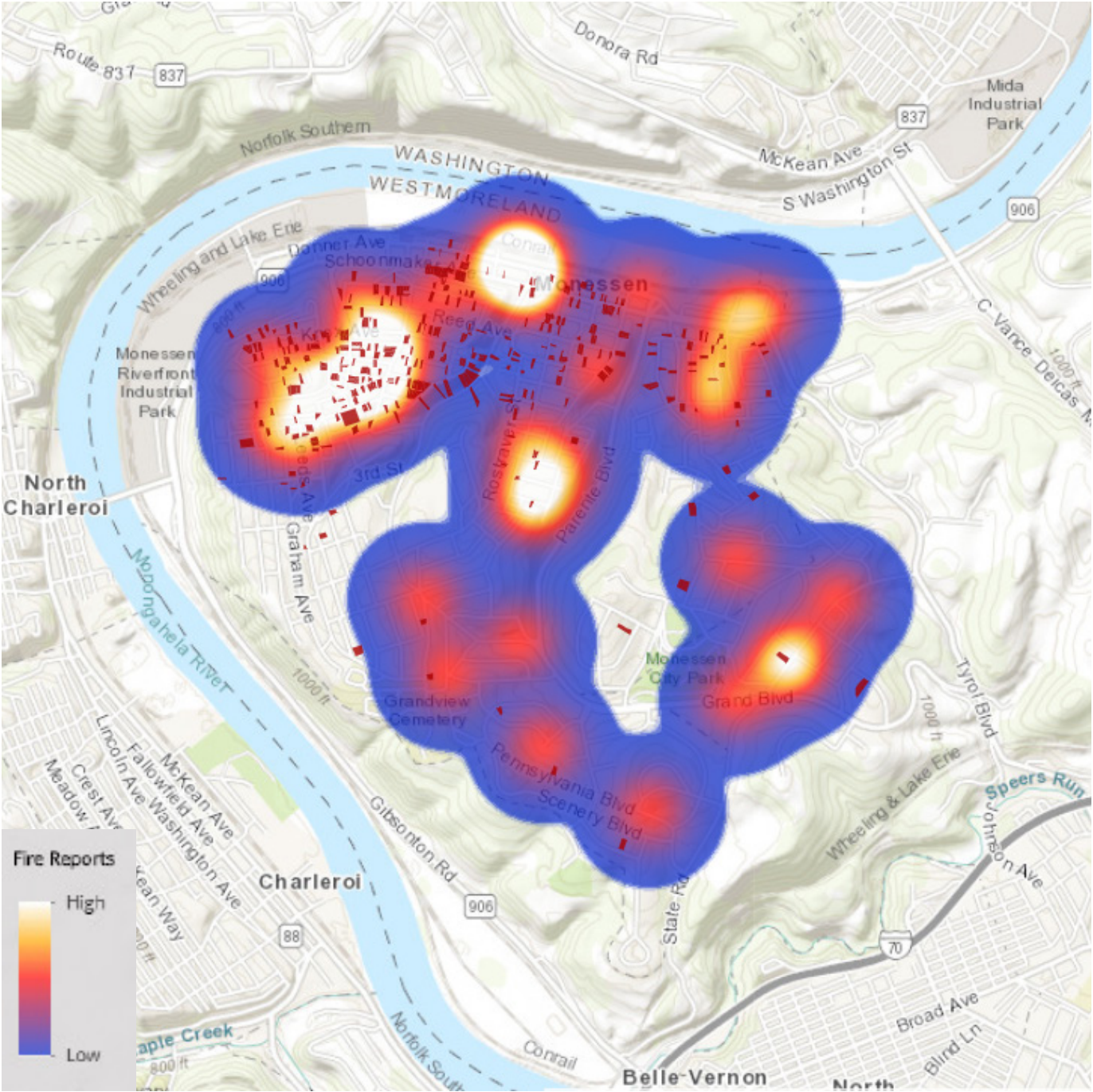
- Major cracking of brick or wood rotting; Missing brick or siding
- Broken, missing or boarded-up windows
- House is a shell or has open holes/immediate safety hazard
- House filled with trash/debris
- Empty lot with major visible debris



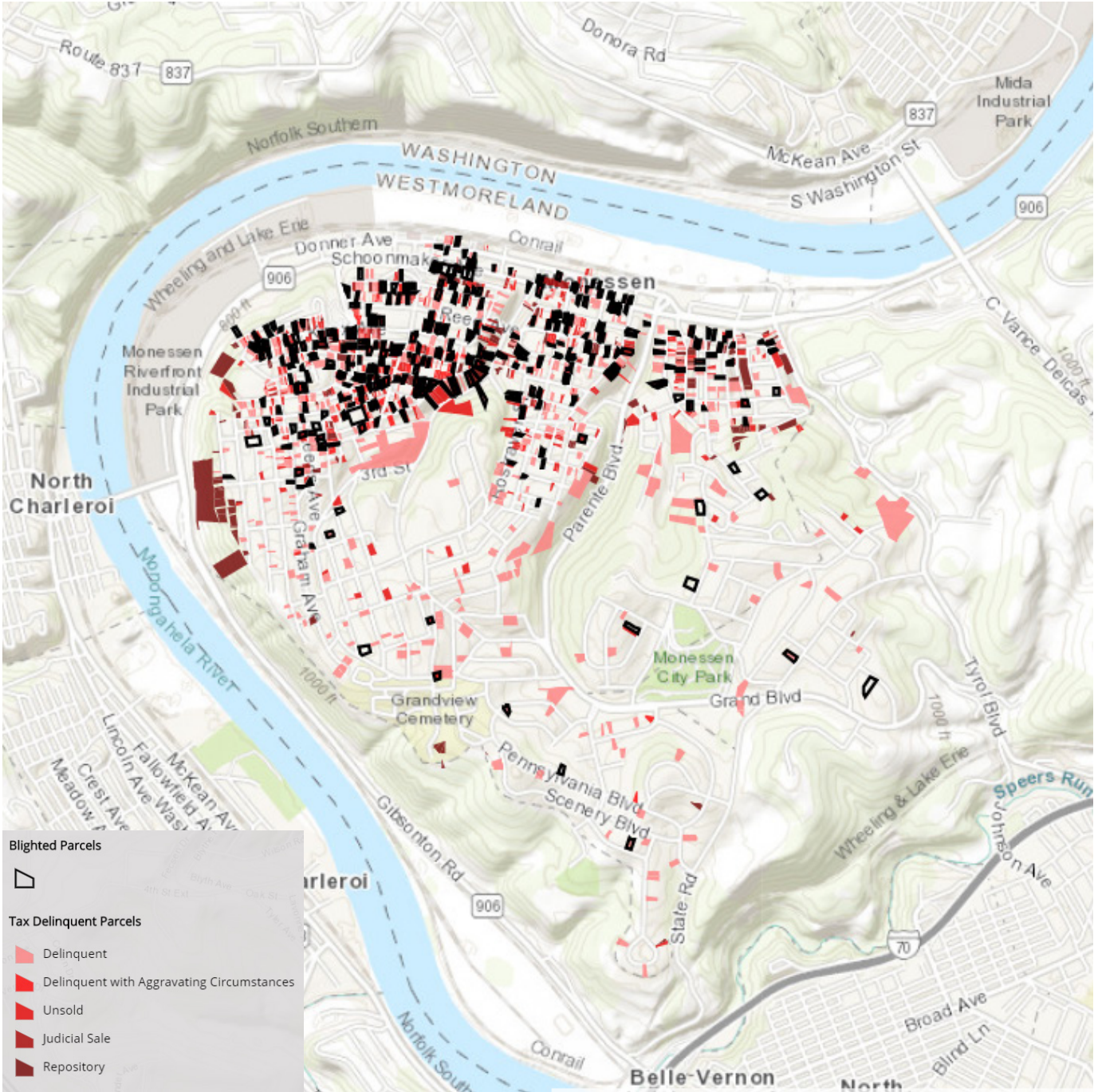
Police incident reports - police data was provided by the City of Monessen Police Department and includes over 2,000 geographic based incidents from 2014 through 2018. Incidents are identified by their Uniform Crime Reporting (UCR) descriptions. The County prepared a heat map of police incident reports to represent locations that have experienced a high volume of crime.



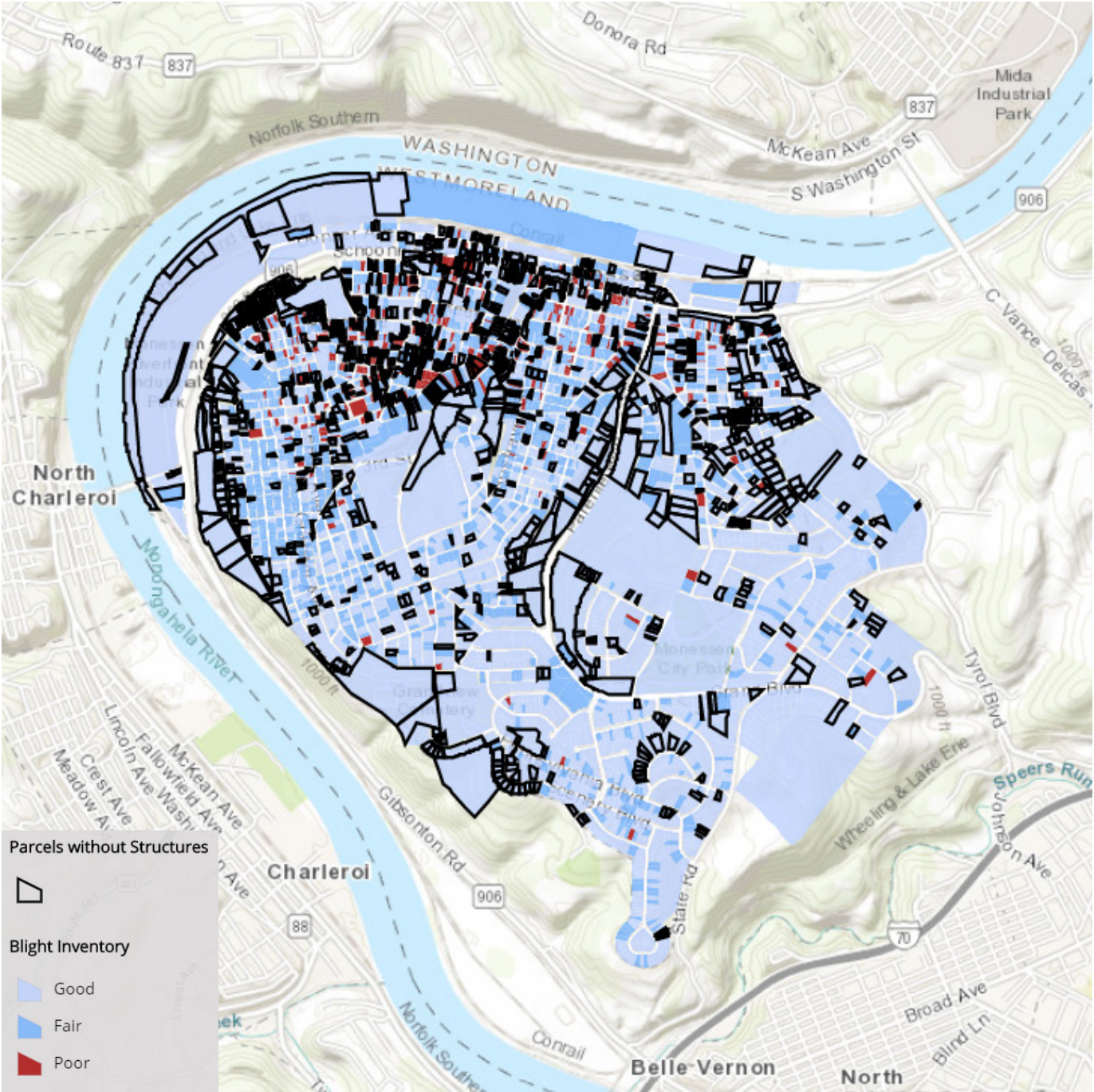
Fire incident reports - fire data was provided by the City of Monessen Fire Department and includes over 36 structural fire incidents from 2014 through 2018. The County prepared a heat map of fire incident reports to represent locations that have experienced a high volume of structural fires.



Tax Delinquent- from data collected at the Westmoreland County Tax Office, varying degrees of tax delinquency are displayed in the map below. Parcels with the lowest degree of delinquency contain lighter shades of red while parcels of a greater degree of delinquency are shaded in a deeper red. This data is representative of records as of April 2019.



Parcels without Structures - parcels with black outlines represent those that do not have a structure on them according to 2017 aerial imagery. An important caveat for this data is that individual buildings can be located across several parcels.



Blight Assessment - what is the nature and extent?

After conducting the blight mapping, we reviewed it with the Planning Committee to see what we learned.

Blight is concentrated in the downtown and the adjacent neighborhoods.

The heaviest concentration of housing blight is found in the neighborhoods between downtown and 3rd Street.

Blighted areas have the most crime.

In Monessen, as in many communities, crime patterns line up with concentrations of deterioration and abandonment, representing a spiral of decay: “When people abandon a home or business, trash accumulates, graffiti multiplies, properties turn to ruin and crime and disorder fester, triggering a cycle in which more people abandon their homes and businesses.”¹

Blighted areas are prone to structural fires.

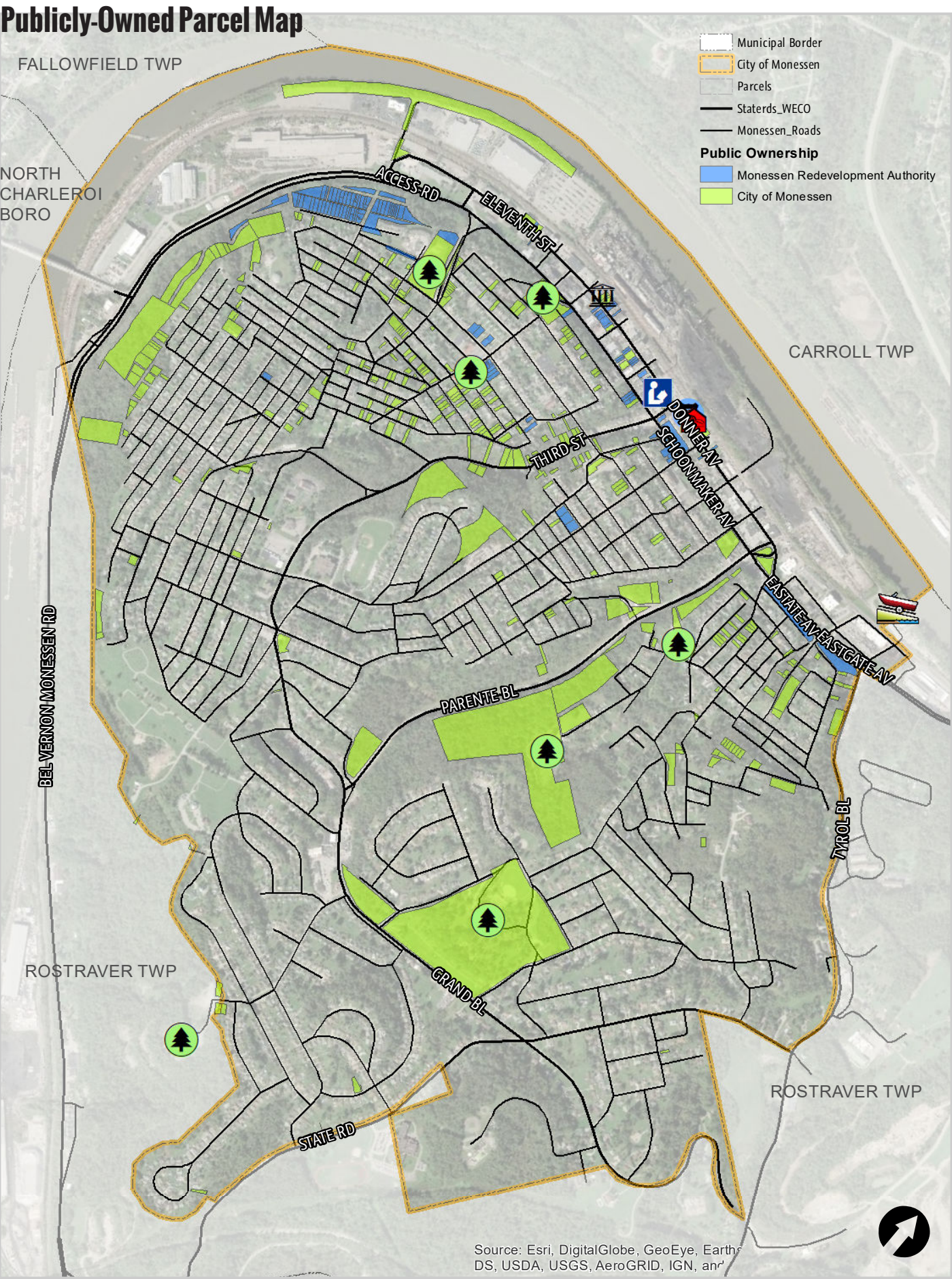
Responding to a fire in an already compromised structure represents a higher level of risk for firefighters, who must contend with the customary hazards of a structure fire as well as the safety problems posed by blight, which make make a building unsafe to enter. Abandoned homes are especially vulnerable to arson.

Tax delinquency is a pervasive and widespread problem.

Parcels with tax delinquency largely overlap and extend beyond concentrations of blight. Unpaid taxes exacerbate revenue problems for the City and limit the resources it can invest in stabilizing and improving neighborhoods. Tax delinquency occurs on properties with and without mortgages, reflecting economic problems that make it difficult or impossible for owners to pay.

The City and the Redevelopment Authority own too many parcels.

Publicly owned parcels generate no property tax revenue for the City. Such properties are assets inasmuch as they represent potential public use and/or repositioning for private investment that will benefit the community, but they also require public services and maintenance that come at a cost. As shown on the map on page 69, the City owns 327 parcels and the Redevelopment Authority owns 113 properties.



Data sources: Westmoreland County Planning Dept

Previous Remediation Efforts

In some cases, the City has demolished several structures in a row, leaving a block of vacant land. This block is owned by the Redevelopment Authority of Monessen.



In other cases, single structures have been demolished and public parks have been created in their place. Motheral Park, located at Motheral Avenue and 4th Street is one such example.



The City and the Redevelopment Authority have also made strides in acquiring blighted structures and are in the process of clearing titles in order to demolish the structure. The abandoned home on Reed Avenue is one example of these efforts.



Existing Tools - what is in the City’s toolbox to fight blight?

The City adopted the 2012 International Property Maintenance Code.

The City enforces the 2012 International Property Maintenance Code (Chapter 289). The City also addressed the unlawful growth or maintenance of grass, weeds and other vegetation under Chapter 147.

The City hired a code enforcement officer in 2016.

Enforcement is led by a part-time code officer. The City only budgets approximately \$15,000 per year to cover code enforcement activities. In a City of Monessen’s size that has a pervasive blight problem, this is nowhere near enough money to adequately address the problem.

Currently, all records are on paper and not available in digital form. In talking with the Police Chief, this is something that could be easily remedied by having the Code Enforcement Officer utilize the Police Department’s database to keep records. In doing so, this would allow the departments to work closer together when responding to calls, as they would know if there have been previous code violations and/or crime incidents.

The City has an ordinance allowing the City to escrow fire insurance proceeds.

The fire insurance proceeds escrow ordinance requires insurance companies to share the proceeds of fire insurance with the City for the demolition of the property in the event of fire. Per the EIP, this has generated revenue for the City over the years to help cover demolition costs.

Implementing Solutions.

Addressing blight is typically divided into three categories: prevention, remediation and redevelopment. The Housing Alliance’s “From Blight to Bright” publication¹ includes proven strategies that municipalities can implement within their own communities. The City’s EIP contains several recommendations to prevent blight and these are assessed below. There is no need to reinvent the wheel - but the biggest thing that the City needs to do is FULLY COMMIT to implementing the recommendations and ensure that they arm their staff with a full arsenal to combat the issue.

“The status quo is not an option. Vacant properties create significant costs for local government, decrease community safety, and deter investment. Returning vacant properties to productive use presents a critical ingredient to revitalize Pennsylvania’s towns and cities. Vacant properties provide the land and structures needed to create new amenities, to inject an aging housing stock with modern alternatives, and to help businesses expand.”

- From Blight to Bright, 2016 pg. 4

Prevention Strategies

Hire a full-time code enforcement officer who has the proper training and dedication to the mission.

The EIP recommended this and as mentioned previously, the City only has a part-time code enforcement officer and only spends approximately \$15,000 per year on enforcement. If the City wants to be more proactive and aggressive in regard to code enforcement, it will need to hire additional staff and allocate a much larger budget. Some of these costs could be recouped through the revenue generated from the recommended Quality of Life Violation ticketing ordinance (page 74).

Adopt the latest version of the International Property Maintenance Code (IPMC) so that code enforcement is applied consistently and with vigor.

The City hasn’t adopted a new IPMC since the EIP was complete; it is still enforcing an old version of the IPMC (2012).

1. From Blight to Bright. Pennsylvania Housing Alliance. 2016. Retrieved online at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5342bfabe4b076ea499631f5/t/5df26cf729e0445a9e2d709f/1576168780027/Blight+to+Bright+rev+June+2016+Print+Friendly.pdf>

Improve the record keeping and tracking of code enforcement.

The EIP recommended that the City purchase, set up, and maintain a property land management software that records all information for every property in the City annually. Such a program would record all results of the inspections, complaints, updates, improvements and renovations that are completed for properties. However, during discussions with the Police Department, it was discovered that the Police system can be used by code enforcement and there is room for the code enforcement officer to work out of their building.

Utilizing the same system not only saves the City money, but it will allow the police and code enforcement to have a stronger working relationship. Both departments will know if there have been previous code violations and/or police calls and be better prepared when facing new calls.

In addition, the City should work with the Westmoreland County Department of Planning and Development to continue to update and utilize the data provided for in the BLIMP, which was completed as part of the Comprehensive Plan. Continuing to track the blighted properties will allow the City to demonstrate progress it makes over the coming years.

Educate residents and property owners on property maintenance.

Make the full text of the Property Maintenance Code available on the City’s website, along with resource guides for property owners and tenants. The resource guides could include contact information for landscaping, towing and junk removal contractors, as well as a summary of key compliance standards. The guides could also include a brochure explaining the process for investigating code violations, follow up procedures, court process and penalties for violators.

To better educate residents, the City could host informational meetings for residents to increase understanding of the process, limitations and responsibilities of the City and property owners.

Enact a rental registration ordinance.

Within the City, 26.9% of all occupied housing units are occupied by renters. A common complaint amongst communities is that many of the landowners do not live in the City and do not maintain their properties, contributing to the blight problem. The EIP recommended that the City mandate a rental-property inspection program on an annual basis for multi-unit properties. The fees should be set high enough to cover the cost of a rental-property inspector to conduct these residential inspections.

“The goal of rental registration ordinances is to preemptively address the burdens that problematic rental properties place on local governments. The registration law allows municipalities to quickly contact owners via phone or e-mail to report problems. Where an owner does not live or work in the municipality, an ordinance may require the owner to assign a local agent who can quickly respond to issues that arise. Each ordinance assesses annual fees to cover the costs of regularly inspecting properties and responding to complaints. Registration offers an opportunity to track and improve the performance of landlords without having to bring them to court.

The law also allows a municipality to inspect a property before each new lease, annually or as infrequently as every three years for properties that have no history of code violations. The law allows a municipality to assess fines and recover costs through property liens for any corrective action that the municipality must take to ensure health and safety.” (From Blight to Bright)

Remediation Strategies

Adopt a “Quality of Life Violation” ticketing ordinance.

“Municipalities that have property maintenance codes may issue tickets and fines for immediate payment—similar to a parking ticket—when code violations are visible on the exterior of a private property. Typical quality-of-life ticket violations include trash and litter on the property, abandoned vehicles or appliances, or high grass and weeds. When inspectors target a single area for the proactive inspection of properties and issue tickets, it is called a sweep.

A quality-of-life ticketing ordinance is designed to streamline the process of punishing violators of nuisance ordinances, freeing up both the magisterial court system and municipal code officials—along with ensuring that revenue from fines goes to local government. The ordinance also makes the process quicker and less expensive for owners.”²

The EIP recommends that the City use this ordinance as a way to issue tickets. Litter, dumping, and graffiti are costly problems that lead to deterioration of property values over time.

2 From Blight to Bright. Pennsylvania Housing Alliance. 2016. Retrieved online at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5342bfabe4b076ea499631f5/t/5df26cf729e0445a9e2d709f/1576168780027/Blight+to+Bright+rev+June+2016+Print+Friendly.pdf>

Mandate an annual commercial-property inspection program that includes fire safety inspections.

Another recommendation from the EIP, commercial property inspections help to keep the business district vibrant and attractive. In addition, the inspections will help reduce the number of serious structural fires. Set the fees high enough to cover the cost of an inspector to conduct the inspections.

Develop a vacant property registration program that requires owners to update information on an annual basis.

Recommended by the EIP, the goal of vacant-property registration ordinances is to “preemptively address the burdens that problematic vacant properties place on local governments. The registration law allows municipalities to quickly contact owners via phone or e-mail to report problems, so that owners know what their responsibilities are under codes and regulations, and to ensure that they meet minimum property-maintenance standards. Generally, registration laws require the owners of vacant properties to submit their contact information and provide a local agent for the service of process. Registration under a vacant-registration ordinance is typically triggered by a certain length of vacancy set by ordinance, but the length of time differs greatly, ranging from a requirement to register immediately upon vacancy to a requirement to register within 120 days after vacancy.” The fees should be set high enough to cover the cost of a rental-property inspector to conduct these residential inspections.

The City can also adopt a foreclosure registration ordinance as part of the vacant property registration ordinance. “Foreclosure registration requires lenders to register all properties with a municipality at the time a bank issues a notice of default. Properties must be registered annually for as long as they remain vacant or in default. The ordinance requires lending institutions to provide a contact person to address safety and aesthetic concerns on the property.

The ordinance covers properties that have been foreclosed or whose lender has issued a notice of default. The program is financed through an annual fee. For example, Susquehanna Township charges a one-time fee of \$200 to register each foreclosed property. Allentown charges an annual fee of \$200 per property.”³

One of the main benefits of this program is that the City can partner with a for-profit company to implement the ordinance for a percentage of the annual fee, thus reducing the burden on the City to implement.

3 From Blight to Bright. Pennsylvania Housing Alliance. 2016. Retrieved online at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5342bfabe4b076ea499631f5/t/5df26cf729e0445a9e2d709f/1576168780027/Blight+to+Bright+rev+June+2016+Print+Friendly.pdf>

Offer a residential tax abatement program that forgives a portion of annual taxes for a period of time to encourage renovations/reoccupancy

A tax abatement program would incentivize investment in Monessen for current and potential future residents, giving the community a comparative selling point for those choosing where to live or whether to stay. As an example, the City of Cleveland offers a temporary elimination of 100% of the increase in real estate property tax that results from certain remodeling or construction improvements on eligible residential/housing projects. The length or term of abatement is 15 years at 100% of the dollar amount by which the eligible new construction or remodeling activities increased the assessed market value of the property. These types of developments may qualify:

- New construction of single-family or two-family dwellings, or multifamily investor-owned properties (15 years);
- Rehabilitation of residential multi-family (three or more units) structures (or conversion of a nonresidential building into a multi-family dwelling) when eligible costs are greater than \$15,000 per unit or \$500,000 per structure (15 years); and
- Rehabilitation of single-family and two-family dwellings (or conversion of nonresidential building into a single-family or two-family dwelling), when eligible costs are greater than \$2,500 and the improvements increase in the assessed value of the property (15 years).

Another option is switching to a land value tax (LVT) system - more information on this is provided on pages 78-79.

Monessen could design its own program to incentivize the types of remodeling and improvements leaders feel would strengthen neighborhoods, giving residents and developers a strong reason to improve properties.

Incentivize property maintenance / community pride through programs such as a best yard program

A relatively inexpensive way to get residents invested in property maintenance as a form of civic pride is to establish a little friendly competition. Setting up some form of a “best yard” program (best vegetable garden, best flower beds, best outdoor summer setup, etc.) and promoting it through neighborhood organizations and/or City social media will not only energize the property owners who are interested in competing, but will reinforce an overall sense of pride and ownership in community. Program leaders could accept photo submissions from owners or from anyone who appreciates a well-maintained property. The program could involve sending out civic groups, scouts, church groups, etc. on a scavenger hunt to identify and recognize outstanding efforts.

Develop a program that offers home purchases at low cost in exchange for bringing them up to code

The City could consult with experts at the County Land Bank to determine how to get low-cost properties into the hands of would-be owners who can invest in and improve them. This could involve reaching out to local lenders to develop and/or increase access to lending programs that package home purchase with the costs of renovation.

Alternately, the City could explore something similar to the “Dollar House” program run by the City of St. Louis , in which its Land Reutilization Authority (LRA) sells single-family homes that it owns for \$1, subject to specific requirements. Buyers must renovate the property to city code and obtain an occupancy permit within 18 months, or the property reverts to the LRA. Buyers will be required to own and occupy the property for at least three years after obtaining the occupancy permit. This program is designed to return tax-delinquent property to productive reuse, to increase access to affordable housing and to improve the quality of housing inventory, all aims that are also relevant in Monessen.

Making the Case for Land Value Tax (LVT)

For over a century, Pennsylvania has undertaken a quiet experiment. It is one of the only U.S. states where cities are allowed to tax land at a higher rate than the buildings on it. Pittsburgh and Scranton adopted this tax system in 1913, and roughly a dozen other cities have followed suit since the 1950s.

These moves were a bet that changing the property tax system could stem the tide of blight and vacancy in Pennsylvania cities: specifically, that taxing land at a higher rate than buildings would incentivize redevelopment and discourage owners from sitting on unused land.¹

How has it worked?

Harrisburg - 90% of the property owners save money with the two-tiered tax rate system. The number of vacant structures has declined from 4,200 in 1982 to under 500 by 2001. Businesses have grown from 1,908 to 8,864.

Allentown - nearly 3 out of 4 properties saw some type of tax cut after the land value tax was approved in 1994. The number of building permits has increased by 32% from before the land tax.

Why does it work?

Cities that institute LVT can reduce or remove not just most or all of the tax on buildings, but a whole menu of local taxes that discourage use (and reuse) of land that already has extensive and still useful infrastructure. LVT is not temporary, does not confer favor for a few, and doesn't disrespect those longtime businesses and citizens that always kept the faith (and their capital) in their hometown.

Why is LVT different? LVT extracts its revenue from the ground, as opposed to the structures sitting on it. Land in cities is made more valuable by already existing physical infrastructure, and services such as police, parks, and schools. Indeed, competition between city and suburb for market investment has always placed communities with extensive infrastructure at a tax disadvantage. Suburbs can skate by with low tax rates because of the newness of their infrastructure.

By not taxing structures and improvements, the city does not discourage property owners from using their land productively. It opens itself to re-growth and reinvestment, which leads to lower long-term costs to property owners; by the same token a good house or office

put up 20 years ago has its tax liabilities reduced as well. This breaks the vicious cycle in which an economically stagnating city must raise tax rates to maintain services and aging infrastructure.

LVT is not a panacea for all of the problems of Pennsylvania's cities. Yet almost all LVT cities have found that long-term non-glamorous gains exist: breathing space and time to figure out what's next. Tax revenues have stayed stable or even increased. Harrisburg's effective municipal tax rate dropped throughout 10 years from 1990 to 2000.

Buildings use infrastructure; vacant lots do not. LVT ramps up the use of existing infrastructure, a century-old asset that literally creates value from the ground up.

Under LVT, vacant or underused land ceases to be a great place to park your money. In most LVT cities the percentage of tax revenue derived from buildings drops from 75% or 80% to 20%. In towns like Millbourne, Clairton, and Aliquippa, tax revenue from the community-generated value of land has gone from 10% or 20% to 80% or 90%. The message to private land bankers is that while land ownership is a right in the United States, somebody will have to start paying for that privilege.

LVT is indeed no silver bullet, but towns that use it and stick with it become fiscally healthier. Their citizens grab the chance to create their own success with an environment that encourages free market activity. It's both an effective tax policy and an ethical way to treat citizens.

“Washington and nearby Monessen (both in Southwestern Pennsylvania) are roughly comparable in size and economy. After Washington started shifting some of its tax off buildings onto land in 1985, its new private construction and renovation increased by 33% in dollar value in the three years after its two-rate adoption, as compared to the prior three years. But during the same time period, nearby Monessen, which kept its single rate, saw new private construction and renovation actually decrease by 26%.

Connellsville, Pa. saw its new private construction and renovation jump 3.46 times in the three years after it adopted a two-rate LVT property tax as compared to the prior three years. This jump over-shadowed the modest 1.07-time increase in new private construction and renovation of nearby one-rate Uniontown during the same time period. The two cities are quite comparable, although Uniontown is the county seat and is somewhat larger. In July 1993, the Aliquippa School District adopted a two-rate building-to-land property tax. Its new private construction and renovation spurted like a geyser. In 1994-95, it was 2.3 times greater than for 1991-92.”

- Steven Cord, July 1, 2010

¹ <http://www.phillyrecord.com/2010/07/land-value-tax-its-worked-to-cut-taxes-boost-economies/>

Develop programs to encourage general property maintenance

The City can play a role in promoting basic property upkeep (painting, pressure washing, weeding, etc.) as well as assisting persons who are unable to complete this work themselves due to physical and/or financial limitations. Options include:

- Partnering with the Monessen School District and/or Adult/Youth probation to provide labor for minor maintenance in identified areas of need (weeding, painting projects, litter removal)
- Creating a “community tools” program providing basic maintenance equipment for residents’ use at reduced fee (ie: pressure washer, ladders, air compressor, etc.) This could function as a library of sorts, allowing residents to sign out donated or publicly owned equipment for temporary use.
- Connecting residents in need with volunteers. The City or neighborhood groups could facilitate residents registering for assistance based on age, disability, income level, etc., and seek volunteers from such sources as youth groups to assist residents with basic maintenance.

Publicize where people can obtain small mortgage loans

One of the issues noted is that it is hard to find lenders that will offer small mortgage loans (less than \$50,000). Many of the homes and/or vacant lots sell for significantly less and people are unable to obtain funding.

The City should establish contact with local lenders and determine how it can be a partner in connecting borrowers with the lending products they might need to acquire and improve property in the City. This could involve creating a list of programs or loan types that the City could distribute and/or inviting lenders to participate in any housing-related workshops or other appropriate public events where potential buyers might benefit from such information.

Redevelopment Strategies

Establish a Blighted Property Review Committee

The City should establish a Property Review Board to create a more transparent public process to determine whether vacant homes are blighted, using the property inventory as a base resource. This group would decide whether: a) the homes should be condemned and resold/renovated, b) demolished with a lien on the property to help recoup demolition costs or resold to adjacent property owners or c) converted to public open space.

Prioritize and Demolish Unsafe Structures and Prepare for Reinvestment.

The City must develop a prioritized list for demolition based on BLIMP project findings, relying on data to determine where limited demolition resources can have the largest impact on neighborhood stabilization. See pages 82-83 for more information.

Work with the County Land Bank to Acquire, Manage and Market Vacant Properties

In 2012, Westmoreland County became one of the first in Pennsylvania to establish a formal means of acquiring and clearing title on difficult-to-redevelop properties. The land bank exists to acquire, hold and transfer interest in real property as approved by its Board of Directors to deter the spread of blight; to promote redevelopment and reuse of vacant, abandoned, and tax-delinquent properties; to support targeted efforts to stabilize neighborhoods; and to stimulate residential, commercial and industrial development.

Currently, the land bank operates in 24 of Westmoreland County’s 65 municipalities, *not* including the City of Monessen. Becoming a member of the land bank would require the City to contribute to programmatic costs, agree (along with its school district) to waive tax liens and realty transfer taxes, and to share future tax revenue at 50% for five years with the land bank after the property is redeveloped and is taxable.

While participation in the land bank involves non-negligible costs, the land bank represents a powerful tool in returning abandoned properties to productive reuse. The City should invite a representative of the land bank to meet with elected officials and formally determine whether membership is worth pursuing at this point.

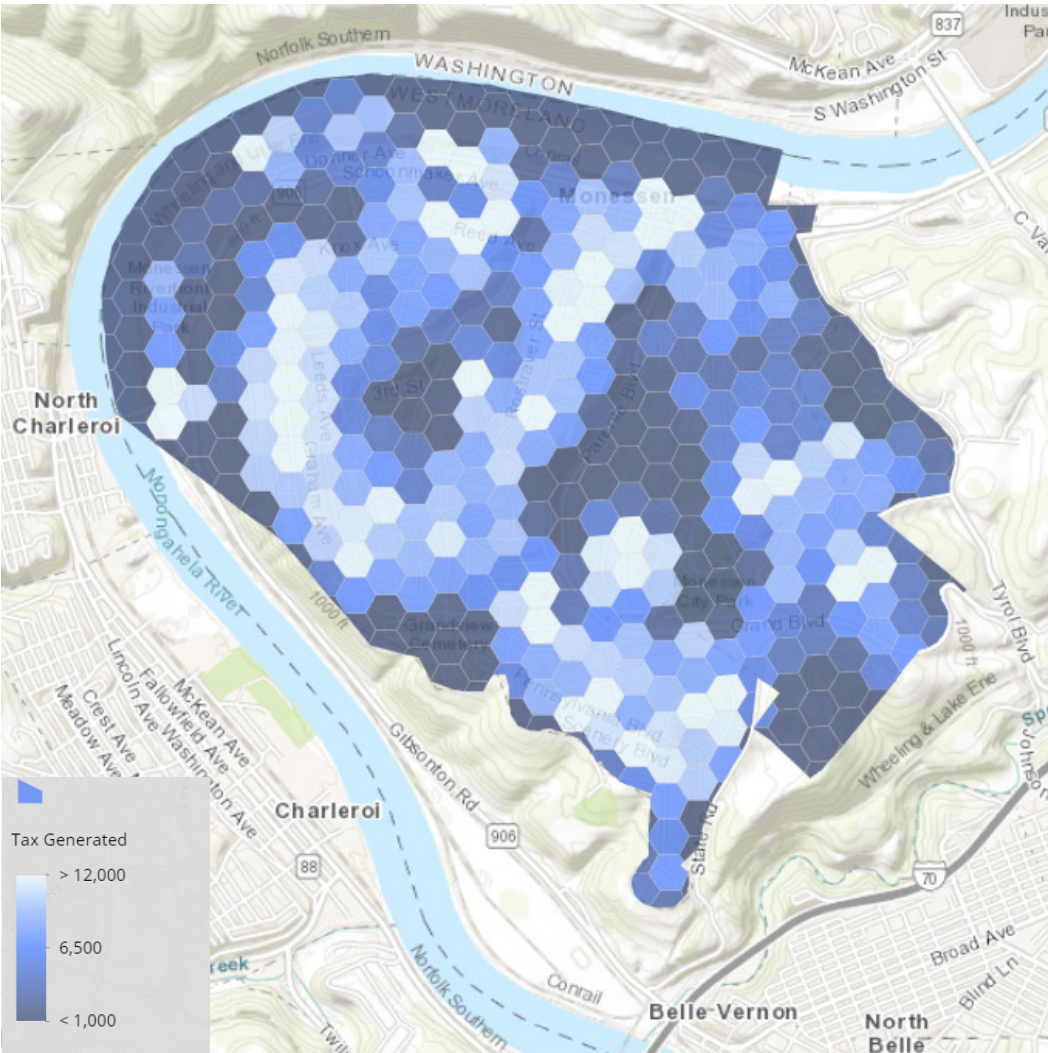
A Redevelopment Strategy for Monessen.

The Westmoreland County Housing Policy and Plan suggests that demolition should be selectively targeted: “While demolition of blighted properties can immediately remove abandoned homes and reduce the dangers associated with them, aggressive demolition can degrade neighborhood integrity. Demolition of an entire row of homes, for instance, can create dead zones that attract crime and separate neighbors. Demolition is an important component of a neighborhood revitalization strategy because it can remove homes that no longer have a market value. The county should limit its demolition in Average and Below Average Markets to the worst instances, and should not demolish multiple homes in the same constrained area unless the demolition is part of a confirmed development.”

Public outreach in Monessen revealed a strong desire to “draw a line” to prevent the further geographic spread of blight, fiercely protecting tipping-point streets from tipping in the wrong direction through further abandonment and deterioration. This would involve focusing some resources in lower-blight neighborhoods, eliminating problems before they take hold and impact surrounding properties.

- Focus demolition within neighborhoods that generate tax revenue. The Westmoreland County Department of Planning and Development prepared a tax generation map for the entire County as part of Reimagining Our Westmoreland; the map for the City is shown to the right. Some neighborhoods generate more tax revenue than others - these are the neighborhoods that the City should prioritize in terms of demolition, infrastructure improvements and redevelopment projects. Keeping these neighborhoods vibrant and healthy will allow the City to have more funds to work with, allowing future revitalization efforts within adjacent neighborhoods.
- Demolition plans should always involve consideration of how the cleared parcels will be reused. If side-yard programs, resale or community gardens are not feasible, lots should not be left unattended and abandoned. Demolition should include proper site clean-up and grading followed by a plan for continued upkeep.
- Market existing properties. As stated previously, the City and the Redevelopment Authority own a number of lots that should be marketed for redevelopment. The City should examine the zoning within these neighborhoods to ensure that the density and housing types permitted makes sense and would be profitable to developers.

Tax Generation - the sum of city property taxes collected was calculated within five acre hexagons across Monessen with 2019 tax figures. Hexagons of lighter shades represent a greater amount of tax generated, while hexagons of darker shades show lower amounts of tax generated. Tax generated is in dollar values. Parcels that are exempt from property taxes were not part of calculation.



Reasons to invest in poor neighborhoods:

It won't take much to see consistently large returns. In these poor neighborhoods, we're not talking about taking \$50,000 homes and making them into \$250,000 homes. Those kind of projects are hit-and-miss risky and not really scalable anyway. What we're really talking about is taking a neighborhood of \$50,000 homes and making them \$55,000 homes. That's a solid 10% increase in the tax base. It's wealth that is shared throughout the neighborhood. It's a real gain -- not an illusion -- that is more likely to persist than some kind of one-off project. And it's repeatable. We can nurture 3-5% annual returns out of these depressed neighborhoods for a long, long time. (And....this is also how you avoid displacement and ensure that the gains in wealth actually go to the poor who are responsible for it.)

Finally, the type of investments that these neighborhoods need in order to experience consistent 3-5% returns over time are very small and low risk. We're talking about things like putting in street trees, painting crosswalks, patching sidewalks, and making changes to zoning regulations to provide more flexibility for neighborhood businesses, accessory apartments and parking. If we try some things and they don't work, we don't lose much because they don't cost much. We learn from our small failures and try something else.'

¹ Strong Towns. Retrieved online at: <https://www.strongtowns.org/journal/2017/1/10/poor-neighborhoods-make-the-best-investment>

Promote State Tax Credit Programs to Spur Investment

The City should seek opportunities to facilitate and take advantage of the following tax credit programs to encourage businesses to invest in projects that improve distressed areas.⁴

Neighborhood Assistance Program (NAP)

A project must serve distressed areas or support neighborhood conservation. Projects must fall under one of the following categories: affordable housing programs, community services, crime prevention, education, job training or neighborhood assistance. A tax credit of up to 55% can be awarded.

Neighborhood Partnership Program (NPP)

Long-term collaborations (five years or more) of business, government and community leaders to produce a comprehensive, asset-based and relationship-driven approach to community development. A tax credit of 75% or 80% can be awarded based on the length of the program (Please refer to the guidelines for more information).

Special Program Priorities (SPP)

This program targets on specific problems and projects which the state has designated as priorities (see NAP/SPP guidelines for a list of the priorities) in a distressed area. The tax benefit to a business firm contributing to an approved SPP application would be eligible for up to a 75% tax credit.

Charitable Food Program (CFP)

The Charitable Food Program (CFP) component of NAP is focused on improving food security in Pennsylvania. CFP assists charitable programs that provide food to low income populations in distressed areas. A tax credit of up to 55% can be awarded.

⁴ More information is available at <https://dced.pa.gov/programs/neighborhood-assistance-program-nap/>

Housing Redevelopment Case Study: City of New Castle

In 2017, the City of New Castle proposed a vacant property ordinance to address vacant property issues in the City’s neighborhoods. The ordinance was controversial and after hearing opposing testimony, the City created a Blight Task Force to address these issues. Through the work of the Task Force, several organizations (such as the Lawrence County Board of Realtors®, Blueprint Communities and Disability Options Network (DON) Enterprises, Inc.) and community members joined forces with City officials to tackle the issue of blight. Throughout the process, the task force became more engaged with community members learning about the variety of efforts other organizations were also contributing to the myriad of problems the City faced.

When the blight task force presented recommendations to the City, they did not have the funding necessary to begin these efforts. So DON stepped up and began spearheading revitalization projects in the Lower East Side neighborhood. A few blocks near the County Courthouse was chosen as the target area in order to demonstrate community impact. Revitalization projects recently completed and/or underway include:

- DON received three blighted properties on or near Court Street from the Lawrence County Land Bank. One was demolished and the other two were renovated, which included making them fully accessible to persons with disabilities.
- In 2018, DON received a grant from FHL Bank of Pittsburgh for five new home builds and another nine will be built through a 2019 grant. All new home builds are single-story energy efficient homes with two bathrooms and a garage. All homes are energy efficient and universally designed.
- In 2019, DON received an award in tax credits from the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development Special Program Priorities Program to fund three primary activities: owner occupied rehab, demolition of vacant properties and rehabbing vacant blighted property for homeownership.
- DON partnered with Lawrence County, the City of New Castle and the Lawrence County Board of Realtors® to complete an Elm Street Plan, which can open up more grant opportunities to help with the revitalization efforts.
- Finally, DON has helped several homeowners with home repairs over the last couple of months.



Develop program that forgives tax liens and gives neighbors an option to obtain adjacent vacant lots

Following the demolition over decades of copious substandard homes within its borders, the City of Pittsburgh found itself in ownership of numerous vacant lots in need of improvement. In response, it developed the Adopt-A-Lot Program, which permits the temporary licensing of vacant lots for food, flower or rain gardens, and it also developed the Side Yard Sale Program, which allows the neighbors of city-owned vacant lots to purchase them. Under the latter program, the City verifies that the buyer’s taxes, water and sewage bills are up to date and that the vacant lot is unbuildable. Then the buyer enters into a lease/purchase agreement with the City for the vacant lot, during which period the City clears the title to the property, a process which takes up to 18 months. When this is finished, the buyer pays approximately \$200 at a closing to cover closing costs, deed recording fees and transfer taxes.

Some version of this program could work for Monessen, removing suitable City-owned parcels from the inventory of those it must maintain and getting them into the hands of neighbors who can care for and use the property.

Case Study: Lower East Side Community Garden

The Lower East Side Community Garden is located in the City of New Castle. A local family purchased the lots a few years ago with the idea of feeding families in need for free. Since April 2019, the family and Tri-County CleanWays have worked together, along with DON Enterprises and neighbors, to transform the previously abandoned lots into a community garden that include an edible rain garden and compost area. In 2019, the crops have helped feed over 50 families.



Where this could work:

The corner of Reed Avenue and 4th Street has a vacant lot that is owned by the City and an abandoned blighted home. Located next to the Monessen Family Center, this corner offers an opportunity for some type of public space - be it a local park or a community garden.



In talking with the Family Center, there is a need for an improved outdoor play area. Motheral Park is located just a few blocks away (Motheral Avenue & 6th Street), which is an underutilized passive park that was established with grant funds as part of a previous redevelopment project. The City should investigate whether the site can be used for a different type of public space - such as a community garden - and construct a local playground at Reed & 4th.





Priority Goal #3: Build local government capacity for implementation.

MONESSEN

Successful communities need a number of things: strong political leadership, a relentless focus on results, a commitment to transparent and ethical government, a strategy for representing and engaging the whole community and good administrative leadership. Only a collaborative approach can get near to delivering all these things.

Political leadership needs a clear vision. But vision without execution is meaningless. Whereas strong political leadership can create an inspiring blueprint for a community’s future, successful public sector organizations recognize that employees, customers and managers all need to buy into that vision for it for it to really work in practice.¹

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/public-leaders-network/2014/may/01/collaborative-leadership-successful-communities>

“There is no big company or big developer just waiting to solve our problems. If there were, they would have to pass up dozens of other comparable places to open their business or redevelop that old downtown building.

...Ultimately the accountability rests with us. We are responsible for making the communities and opportunities that will attract, develop, and retain a diverse and stable workforce.”

- Reimagining Our Westmoreland, pg. 5

Defining the Problem.

One of the biggest concerns that kept coming up during the planning process was “who is going to implement the plan?” There are several issues facing the City of Monessen that threaten its ability to implement the Comprehensive Plan, or any other plan for that matter.

Local government is fractured.

For any community to be successful, the local government and the citizens need to have a collective voice. We need to focus on becoming one community that is led by a unified government. Everyone has the same goal - a better Monessen. We need to start working together so that we can overcome our obstacles and start implementing the vision.

The City operates on a limited budget.

Financial resources are scarce. The financial situation is extensively covered in the City’s EIP. There is no need for the Comprehensive Plan to re-address these issues, but the City needs to continue to implement the recommendations from the EIP so that it can become more financially solvent. It may want to consider at a future point entering into the Municipalities Financial Recovery Act, Act of 1987, P.L. 246, No. 47. (known as Act 47), which is administered by the Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED).


Capacity in terms of staffing is extremely limited.

The current City government lacks the staff and capacity to take on many of the recommendations and strategies identified in the EIP, the County Plan and this plan. Staff is limited; many people are doing more than their job description. We are looking for creative solutions to leverage partnerships and volunteer boards to help our local government implement our collective vision for our City’s future.



Third Class City Code

general assemblysenatehousesession infolegislationstatutes



Pennsylvania General Assembly

The City of Monessen is a Third Class City, subject to the regulations provided under Act of Nov. 24, 2015, P.L. 242, No. 67.

The Mayor is elected at large, serves a four (4) year term, and is charged with oversight of Public Affairs which includes the police department. Although the Mayor acts as the titular head of the City government, the position is one of five Council members with equal authority and an equal vote with no “veto” power under this form of government.

The City Council is made up of the Mayor and four (4) other Council members who are elected “at large.” The Council approves the ordinances, resolutions, and policies for the City. The Council carries out both legislative and administrative functions and each member of Council heads a City Department. The departments identified in the Code are:

- Director of Public Affairs (Police) Mayor
- Director of Accounts and Finance Council
- Director of Public Safety (Fire, Codes) Council
- Director of Streets and Improvements Council
- Director of Parks and Public Property Council

The EIP states “In Monessen, the policy process has been somewhat inconsistent because there has been and continues to be transition in the Clerk’s position and in Council positions. A priority for the Mayor and Council should be to introduce stability in staff positions within the organization. Hiring trusted professional staff would provide the Mayor and Council with the technical skills and reliable advice that they need to conduct City business effectively.” The EIP recommended the hiring of a City Administrator, which was done.

Source: <https://www.legis.state.pa.us/cfdocs/legis/LI/uconsCheck.cfm?txtType=HTM&yr=2015&sessInd=0&smthLwInd=0&act=0067>

Implementing Solutions.

Hire additional staff.

The City of Monessen is operating on a shoestring budget; however, without a professional staff to handle the daily operations, it is unlikely conditions will improve. It also seems an impossible task to ask of the current employees to take on even more responsibilities than their current jobs demand.

Hire a new Community Development Director

When the EIP was completed in 2017, the City had a Community Development Director. By late 2018 when the Comprehensive Plan began, this was no longer the case. As such, there is currently no one overseeing the City’s Department of Community Development other than the Mayor. The Community Development Director is responsible for grants management and the oversight of the Community Development Block Grant Program (CDBG). The City had contracted with a third party to oversee the CDBG program but at this time is unfulfilled. The Community Development Department also includes the code enforcement officer.

The Community Development Director should oversee all community development, economic development and planning related activities. The Director should serve as the City’s staff for the Planning Commission, oversee the zoning and code enforcement activities and work with the City Engineer to review and coordinate subdivision and land development activities.

Hire additional Code Enforcement staff.

Currently, the City employs one full-time code enforcement officer. Code enforcement is arguably one of the most pressing issues facing the City and by all accounts is too much for one employee. Particularly without the Community Development Director to assist with administrative duties in issuing notices, the needs of the position cannot be fulfilled by one person.

Ensure that the City Planning Commission is functioning properly.

As of the writing of this plan, the City has a Planning Commission in name only - City Council has appointed citizens to serve but it has not met and is not functioning. The Planning Commission plays a vital role in the implementation of the Comprehensive Plan, among other functions related to planning, land development and zoning. The PA DCED publication *Planning Series #2 The Planning Commission in Pennsylvania* provides an educational and helpful overview on the roles and responsibilities of the planning commission and is available online.

At a minimum, the following is recommended:

1. Planning Commission should meet on a monthly basis, with public notice published annually at the start of the year.
2. The Planning Commission should be overseen by the Community Development Director, who would set agendas, attend meetings, etc.
3. The Planning Commission should prepare and submit an annual report to City Council on the implementation status of the Comprehensive Plan.
4. The City’s subdivision and land development ordinance currently delegates approval authority to the Planning Commission for subdivisions and land development applications (in some municipalities, the planning commission only recommends actions to the governing body). As such, it is vital that the Planning Commission members understand the process and their responsibilities with regard to the approval process.
5. The Planning Commission should be the entity to take on oversight of the recommended update of the City’s zoning ordinance and subdivision and land development ordinance.
6. The Planning Commission should develop and adopt bylaws, a sample of which can be found in the Planning Series #2 publication by PA DCED.

Create an economic development task force.

The City should establish an Economic Development Task Force to help oversee and manage redevelopment efforts. This Task Force would be responsible for helping to create the requests for proposals for development sites, assist in marketing efforts related to development sites, assist with identifying potential funding sources and perhaps even writing grants and other activities as warranted.

The Task Force should include representatives from a variety of local and regional organizations including but not limited to: City Council, the Redevelopment Authority of the City of Monessen, Westmoreland County Department of Planning and Development, the Mon Valley Initiative, Mon Valley Progress Council and local citizens and business owners.

Rebuild the Monessen Chamber of Commerce.

The relationship between the local business owners and the local government was cited as one of the important issues facing the City. Many local business owners feel they are unfairly targeted by the City’s ordinances and regulations, mostly as a result of the high rate of vacant buildings and absentee landlords. Most local business owners belong to both the Mon Valley Regional Chamber of Commerce and the Greater Rostraver Chamber, but it would serve the City well to have its own that could focus on strengthening these relationships. There was a lot of discussion centering around the need to rebuild or re-activate the Greater Monessen Chamber of Commerce; its current status is somewhat unknown. A high priority for the City has to be retaining their local businesses and an improved dialogue about what their needs are would go a long way towards business retention.

Encourage municipal officials and staff to attend training.

The Local Government Academy (LGA) offers many courses and training opportunities for elected officials and staff. In particular, the Newly Elected Officials Course (NEOC) is a comprehensive program for public officials to build a solid foundation of knowledge essential for effective governing. Focusing on the specific needs of local government officials, and featuring expert instructors from both academia and the “real world,” NEOC provides elected officials a comprehensive look into municipal finance, public safety, personnel law, ethics, media relations, and more.¹

¹ <https://localgovernmentacademy.org/programs/the-newly-elected-officials-course/>

Create a regional Council of Governments.

A Council of Governments (COG) is a type of regional planning body that consists of elected public officials who come from the local governments to establish a consensus about the needs of an area and the actions needed to solve local and interlocal problems. Within Pennsylvania, they are allowed under the Intergovernmental Cooperation Act, as amended, to basically allow municipalities to cooperate on a variety of local issues, such as ordinances, joint purchases and joint-cooperative agreements.



<https://pacog.com/>

The City should reach out to neighboring municipalities to determine the level of interest in creating a regional COG. This would afford a number of benefits to the municipalities; the most popular uses of a COG include cable TV, code enforcement (UCC, BOCA), emergency management, equipment sharing, geographic and information systems (GIS), grants administration, planning, regional police, purchasing, recycling, stormwater management, training and zoning administration.

More information regarding COGs and their benefits can be found online at <https://pacog.com/>.

Build relationships with business community and educational institutions.

The overall prosperity of Monessen is inherently tied to that of that of the Mon Valley. The City will need to cultivate partnerships with regional entities, such as neighboring municipalities, institutions and economic organizations to improve the prosperity of the entire region.

Douglas Education Center (DEC) is a private for-profit institution that focuses on providing students with a quality education as well as provide prospective employers with well-trained personnel. Programs offered include creative (special make-up effects, filmmaking), beauty and wellness (cosmetology, esthetics, massage therapy), skilled trades (heavy equipment, CDL) and allied health (medical assistant and medical billing and coding).

DEC owns and occupies 11 buildings in downtown Monessen, spread out along Donner and Schoonmaker Avenues. Their facilities represent excellent examples of downtown revitalization with renovated and re-purposed buildings, including an old church. Home to approximately 267 students, it provides a steady flow of youth into the City and a potential market for local businesses.

- Designate representatives from City Council and School Board to sit on each others board
- Work with the School District and local businesses to develop/host programs such as career days, job shadowing, apprenticeship, etc.
- Work with the School District to incorporate new programs into the curriculum, such as coding and other technology-driven classes
- Discuss possible opportunities for school district merger/consolidation
- Connect the Douglas Education Center and its students to the school district
- Host quarterly roundtables with the local business community to discuss needs and opportunities
- Coordinate with local institutions to develop and/or promote workforce training opportunities. Training programs should directly engage employer and industry partners, or actively guide students to career specific training. Successful training programs often rely on input from or partnerships with employers and industry partners in order to direct trainees to invest in courses and fields of study relevant to available jobs. Without this type of collaboration, newly trained or retrained workers may find themselves without the skills needed by industry, skills that are required for long-lasting labor market success.

Promote available programs.

The City is home to many assets, including local organizations that offer a number of programs and resources. The City should look to enhance partnerships with these organizations to publicize available programs, such as the Monessen City Library; small, locally-owned businesses via City website; and available financial and technical resources to help budding entrepreneurs and small businesses.

Create an economic development website that includes an inventory of available properties for development and purchase/lease.

The City and the Redevelopment Authority own a combined 400+ parcels throughout the City. To help get these properties back on the tax rolls, they need to market their availability - whether it be for development or through the recommended site-lot program. If both residents and prospective developers were aware of the opportunities, it may increase interest and help to start rebuilding the City’s tax base.

Focus on diversity and inclusion.

Social equity is an important component of a healthy City. Ensuring that underserved populations within a community have the opportunity to be heard when City officials are making decisions is key to being a diverse and inclusive City. Underserved populations may include, but are not limited to, seniors, disabled, minorities, etc.

- Target community outreach efforts to underserved communities to gauge their needs regarding services.
- Facilitate collaboration between local service providers, culturally specific organizations and community non-profits to identify and address the community’s basic needs for education, training, health care and social services.
- Ensure that representatives of underserved or marginalized populations are at the table when discussing public projects that impact their communities.
- Ensure that land use policies and decisions are fair and equitable.
- Prioritize street improvements that provide families with safe routes to work, school and recreation, such as mid-block crossings between multi-family housing units and parks, street lighting, sidewalks, bike lanes, etc.
- Prioritize active transportation projects near low-income housing.
- Prioritize close proximity to parks and recreation centers in land use decisions and City expansion.



MONESSEN IMPLEMENTATION

How do we get there?

By embracing the principles for action laid out in Reimagining Our Westmoreland as follows:

- 1. Accountability.** Our City leaders, those currently in office and those of the future, need to embrace the plan.
- 2. Partnership.** Our City government can't do it alone. We must support them by building partnerships with local and regional organizations.
- 3. Build off of assets.** This plan is not replacing previous plans, but rather embracing previous ideas and supporting efforts already underway.
- 4. Action oriented and attainable.** Implementation is most often times reached through a series of small steps rather than one major project.
- 5. Creative, experimentation & new ways of thinking.** We can't expect to change our community by doing it "the way it's always been done."
- 6. Communications & collaboration.** We need to maintain open lines of communication with our residents and partner organizations. We need transparency.
- 7. Performance monitoring, metrics & benchmarks.** It is up to us to monitor the implementation of this plan by tracking what we have done.

Editor's note: this plan was prepared prior to the Covid-19 pandemic. In addition to the City's previous financial issues, we recognize that due to the economic fallout at the federal, state and local levels, the recommendations and potential funding sources identified within this plan may be impacted.

Implementation Plan

To assist the City of Monessen with implementing the Comprehensive Plan, a matrix was developed that includes the following information:

- Timeframe - each action item is assigned a timeframe for implementation. Short-term actions should be started in the next 1-5 years and long-term actions should be started within 6-10 years.
- Action Required for Implementation - every action will require some type of action by the City in order to implement it. In keeping with Reimagining Our Westmoreland (the County’s Comprehensive Plan), we have identified each recommendation as follows:
 - » Policy- items that will require the involvement of City Council, either through a policy change, resolution or ordinance.
 - » Project - items that will require funding, either through the municipal budget or grants/loans.
 - » Program - items that will require substantial time and/or resources of the City’s Staff.

	Timeframe for Implementation	Action Required for Implementation		
		Project	Program	Policy
GOAL: REVITALIZE DOWNTOWN				
Right-size Downtown Monessen.				
Target new development to the core area within the downtown.	Short		X	
Prioritize and maintain a list of properties that need to be demolished and develop public and private partnerships to demo and plan for redevelopment.	Short		X	
Update the Zoning Ordinance	Short			X
Streamline the Development Process.	Short			X
Provide pad-ready development sites.				
Prepare requests for proposals (RFP) for key publicly-owned sites for redevelopment.	Short	X		
Determine the feasibility of creating a tax increment financing district (TIF).	Long		X	
Support small businesses and encourage entrepreneurs.	Short		X	
Enhance multi-modal transportation options.				
Lobby the MMVTA to expand bus service .	Long		X	
Implement the bicycle and pedestrian plan from the EIP Special Conditions Report.	Long	X		
Address failing infrastructure.				
Implement the 2017 Corrective Action Plan.	Short	X		
Adopt a multi-year street maintenance plan.	Short	X		
Enhance the aesthetic appearance of Downtown.				
Improve public spaces.	Long	X		
Implement a wayfinding signage program.	Long	X		
Promote and utilize the boat launch more.	Short	X		

	Timeframe for Implementation	Action Required for Implementation		
		Project	Program	Policy
GOAL: ELIMINATE BLIGHT				
Prevention Strategies				
Hire a full-time code enforcement officer who has the proper training and dedication to the mission.	Short	X		
Adopt the latest version of the International Property Maintenance Code (IPMC) so that code enforcement is applied consistently and with vigor.	Short			X
Improve the record keeping and tracking of code enforcement.	Short			X
Educate residents and property owners on property maintenance.	Short		X	
Enact a rental registration ordinance.	Short			X
Remediation Strategies				
Adopt a “Quality of Life Violation” ticketing ordinance.	Long			X
Mandate an annual commercial-property inspection program that includes fire safety inspections.	Long		X	
Develop a vacant property registration program that requires owners to update information on an annual basis.	Short			X
Offer a residential tax abatement program that forgives a portion of annual taxes for a period of time to encourage renovations/reoccupancy	Short		X	
Incentivize property maintenance / community pride through programs such as a best yard program	Short		X	
Develop a program that offers home purchases at low cost in exchange for bringing them up to code	Long		X	
Develop programs to encourage general property maintenance	Short		X	
Publicize where people can obtain small mortgage loans	Short		X	

	Timeframe for Implementation	Action Required for Implementation		
		Project	Program	Policy
Redevelopment Strategies				
Establish a Blighted Property Review Committee	Short			X
Prioritize and Demolish Unsafe Structures and Prepare for Reinvestment.	Short	X		
Work with the County Land Bank to Acquire, Manage and Market Vacant Properties	Long	X		
Promote State Tax Credit Programs to Spur Investment	Long		X	
Develop program that forgives tax liens and gives neighbors an option to obtain adjacent vacant lots	Long		X	
GOAL: BUILD CAPACITY				
Hire additional staff.	Long	X		
Ensure that the City Planning Commission is functioning properly.	Short			X
Create an economic development task force.	Short			X
Rebuild the Monessen Chamber of Commerce.	Long		X	
Encourage municipal officials and staff to attend training.	Short		X	
Create a regional Council of Governments.	Long		X	
Build relationships with business community and educational institutions.	Short		X	
Promote available programs.	Short		X	
Create an economic development website that includes an inventory of available properties for development and purchase/lease.	Short		X	
Focus on diversity and inclusion.	Short		X	

Potential Funding Opportunities

Arts & Culture

- ArcelorMittal USA Inc. Corporate Giving Program
- Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation
- FirstEnergy Foundation
- GE Foundation
- Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation
- Mid Atlantic Arts Foundation
- Schwab Charitable Fund
- Sophia Pipinos Charitable Trust
- Surdna Foundation, Inc.
- The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts
- The Grainger Foundation, Inc.
- The Pfizer Foundation, Inc.

Community & Economic Development

- Alcoa Foundation
- AmazonSmile Foundation
- Cisco Systems Foundation
- Claude Worthington Benedum

Education

- Foundation
- Fidelity Charitable Gift Fund
- John C. Williams Charitable Trust
- Kresge Foundation
- Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, Inc.
- PA Department of Community & Economic Development (PA DCED)
- Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency (PHFA)
- The Albert Schenk III & Kathleen H. Schenk Charitable Trust No. 1
- The Allstate Foundation
- The Annie E. Casey Foundation
- The JPMorgan Chase Foundation
- The Wal-Mart Foundation, Inc.
- Verizon Foundation
- W. K. Kellogg Foundation

Education

- ArcelorMittal USA Inc. Corporate Giving Program
- EQT Foundation, Inc.
- The Pittsburgh Foundation
- The Wal-Mart Foundation, Inc.

Environment

- ArcelorMittal USA Inc. Corporate Giving Program
- Charles H. Douglas Charitable Trust
- Hugh I. Shott, Jr. Foundation Inc.
- PA Department of Environmental Protection (PA DEP)
- The H. P. and Anne S. Hunnicutt Foundation, Inc.
- TreeVitalize
- United States Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

Health & Human Services

- ArcelorMittal USA Inc. Corporate Giving Program
- Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation
- Hugh I. Shott, Jr. Foundation Inc.
- John C. Williams Charitable Trust

Public Safety

- ArcelorMittal USA Inc. Corporate Giving Program
- Claude Worthington Benedum Foundation
- Hugh I. Shott, Jr. Foundation Inc.
- Starvaggi Charities, Inc.

Recreation

- Brickstreet Foundation, Inc.
- Bernard McDonough Foundation, Inc.
- Colcom Foundation
- George W. Bowers Family Charitable Trust
- Hugh I. Shott, Jr. Foundation Inc.
- PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (PA DCNR)
- Richard King Mellon Foundation
- The Allstate Foundation
- The Grainger Foundation, Inc.
- The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
- The Wal-Mart Foundation, Inc.

Transportation/Infrastructure

- Commonwealth Financing Authority (CFA)
- PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (PA DCNR)
- PA WalkWorks
- PennDOT
- Pennsylvania Infrastructure Investment Authority (PENNVEST)

Consistency with the PA Municipalities Planning Code (MPC)

This section includes language incorporated into Monessen’s plan to comply with the MPC.:

Adjacent Communities

As indicated in Article III, Section 301 (5) of the MPC, the relationship of the existing and proposed development in Monessen should be analyzed in relation to the existing and proposed development in adjacent communities and the region. The planning process involved review and coordination with *Reimagining Westmoreland*, the County’s Comprehensive Plan as well as sending the draft plan to all adjacent communities for review. To our knowledge there are no issues regarding disparate uses that may require buffering or other transitional devices.

Interrelationship

The synthesis of interrelated activities to resolve issues and problems is an important foundation to good community planning. In this regard, there are linkages among the plan issues, goals and actions of Monessen’s Comprehensive Plan. All are related and should further the overall vision, described on page 23.

State Water Plan

In compliance with the MPC, Article III, Section 301 (b), the Monessen Comprehensive Plan supports efforts to provide a reliable supply of water and provisions aimed at adequately protecting water supply sources. These should be developed in consideration of current and future water resources availability and its uses and limitations. The Comprehensive Plan is in conformance with the Pennsylvania State Water and recognizes that:

- Lawful activities such as extraction of minerals impact water supply sources and such activities are governed by statutes regulating mineral extraction that specify replacement and restoration of water supplies affected by such activities.
- Commercial agriculture production impact water supply sources.

Natural and Historic Resources

Monessen has a large number of natural and historic resources that should be protected to the greatest extent possible. A list of these resources is included below and on the following page::

Natural Sites:

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| • Monessen City Park | • Columbus Park |
| • 9th Street Park | • Hoover Park |
| • 6th Street (‘Hillside’) Park | • Herman Mihalich River Launch Park |
| • Motheral Park | • City Soccer Field |
| • Summit Avenue Park | • Pennsylvania Blvd. Wildlife Sanctuary Area |
| • Shawnee Park | |

Historic Sites:

- | | |
|--|--|
| • Pittsburgh Steel War Memorial (12th & Schoonmaker) | • Monessen Memorial Stadium (Works Progress Administration Project) |
| • Historic Caboose (17th Street) | • Monessen City Park Amenities (Works Progress Administration Project) |
| • Downtown Monessen (Donner & Schoonmaker, from Parente Blvd to 12th St) | • 6th Street (‘Hillside’) Park |
| Most Notably: | • Lady Columbia Memorial (Eastgate) |
| • First Christian Church | • Toussaint’s Corner War Memorial (At Hilltop Fire Station) |
| • First Baptist Church | • Former Monessen German Club (Reed and 2nd Street) Monessen French Club, 3rd Street |
| • St Leonard’s (Orchard Church) | • Former Monessen Hungarian Club, Parente Blvd. |
| • St. Leonard’s Rectory | • Former Northern Italian Political Association Club, Knox Avenue |
| • St. Leonard’s School | • Oaky Lodge, Knox Avenue |
| • St. Leonard’s Nunnery (Savini School) | • Former Polish National Alliance Club, Reed Avenue |
| • Landmark Place (Former AFL-CIO Hall) | • Former Son’s of Italy Club, 6th Street |
| • Monessen Civic Center (Former National Guard Armory) | • “Ten Commandment” Houses, Dennis Avenue |
| • Monessen Savings and Trust | • Former St. Hyacinth Polish Church (Mt. Calvary Baptist Church), Reed Avenue |
| • 5th Avenue Hotel | • Former Holy Name Slovak Church, Reed Avenue |
| • First National Bank and Trust Co. | • Former St. Luke’s Finnish Church, Reed Avenue |
| • Taylor Building | • Former Syrian Orthodox Church, 9th Street |
| • Former Monessen City Hall | • Former Slovak Presbyterian Church, Knox Avenue |
| • Brown Street Clock | • St. Nicholas Ukrainian Orthodox Church, Reed Avenue |
| • Turner Hall | • Gate of Heaven Church, Reed Avenue |
| • Manown House | • Union Baptist Church, McMahon Avenue |
| • Former Moose Lodge | • Wayman AME Church, Reed Avenue |
| • Former Italian Club (Felicia’s Lounge) | • St Paul’s Lutheran Church, Grand Boulevard |
| • Former Monessen Elks (Italian Society of Mutual Aid) | • Former Temple Beth-Am, Watkins Avenue |
| • United Methodist Church | • Former St. Cajetan’s Church, Knox Avenue |
| • Former Slovak Home | • Epiphany of Our Lord Church, Pennsylvania Blvd. |
| • Barber Building | • Former United Brethren Church, Reed Avenue |
| • Gemmill Hospital (Douglas Education Center Admin Building) | • St. Spyridon Church |
| • Check Building | • Bon Air Terrace Stucco Homes |
| • McKee Avenue (Oneida St to McKee Way) | |
| Most Notably: | |
| • George Nash House | |
| • Colonel Charles Derickson House | |
| • St. Mary’s Church | |
| • St. John’s Church | |
| • G.F. Wright House | |
| • Former Trinity Church (Newness of Life) | |
| • Parente House | |
| • Ben Franklin School | |
| • Washington School | |



This plan was prepared by:

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