

Proposed West Rockhill budget includes no tax hike. Page A2
 Blake chosen as new chief of Pennridge Regional police. Page A2

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MAIN STREET USA: TAKE TWO

RISING FROM THE ASHES

Perkasie's downtown poised for resurgence nearly 30 years after devastating fire



GEOFF PATTON — MONTGOMERY MEDIA

Firefighters stand near a firetruck destroyed by fire at Seventh and West Market streets in Perkasie Sunday, June 26, 1988.

By Eric Fitzsimmons
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PERKASIE » For 27 years after a fire that swept through Perkasie's downtown, the site of the American House Hotel sat vacant. Now a new development that broke ground on the same site this summer stands to be the hallmark of the borough's recent revitalization efforts.

"For 20 some years, we hoped someone would develop this property and grow the spark created by the strong entrepreneurs who make their living in downtown Perkasie and who enrich our lives. For 20 years we hoped, and then we took action," Matthew Aigeldinger, a councilman and chairman of the economic development committee, said at the

groundbreaking. Economic Development Director Stephen Barth noted the success the borough has been experiencing since the adoption of a comprehensive plan in 2014, including 140 townhomes at the former site of Perkasie Industries, historic buildings adapted for use as high-end apartments and the two new developments going in



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— Matthew Aigeldinger, Perkasie Borough Council member

downtown: the (new) American House and its neighbor, the Perkasie Commercial Center.

These new projects hold special significance for the borough and the downtown in particular. The lots have sat vacant since the 1988 fire that devastated the downtown, according to council Vice President Jim Purcell.

Both the American House Hotel and Leshner's 5-10-\$1.00 store were destroyed in the fire, Purcell said, along with a building belonging to Shelly's Lumber across Market Street, while several other buildings were damaged in the blaze.

The fire was a major blow to the district, but it also brought attention to problems that had been facing the downtown. Develop-

ment in the area had been hampered since the 1960s by a maxed-out sewage system, Purcell said, and the plumbing in the downtown was not trusted to take the pressure firefighters needed and so a large pool was set up and water trucked in to keep the hoses running.

Business and property owners banded together to form groups like the Perkasie Towne Improvement Association, the successor to the Perkasie Olde Towne Association, to promote the downtown and be a voice to the council, according to Purcell, resulting in successes such as infrastructure improvements in the downtown.

A plan for change

Perkasie Towne Improvement Association President Joe Ferry said several things have had to come together to bring about the recent successes in town.

It started with an agreement; the association, the borough and the Pennridge Chamber of Commerce deciding the time was right for redevelopment and how to go about it.

"The first thing that we decided was that, if it was going to be successful, we needed somebody, some one person, to lead the charge," Ferry said.

Barth, who had been doing similar work for Hatboro, was brought on in 2013, which proved to be fortuitous timing, Ferry explained, as it aligned with the development of a new comprehensive plan for the borough.

"The comprehensive plan is the blueprint for economic development. It's going to tell you where it happens, why it happens, when it happens — you know, all those good things," Ferry said.

Barth said he considered the American House site and its neighbor a top priority when he was hired in 2013.

The two properties had sat vacant since the destruction caused by the devastating 1988 fire, leaving an empty hole at the heart of the borough's downtown for more

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PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PERKASIE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

A postcard view of the American Hotel that stood on the corner of Seventh and Market streets in Perkasie.



GEOFF PATTON — MONTGOMERY MEDIA

The intersection of North Seventh and Market streets in Perkasie, the site of the Moyer Building that was destroyed by fire, left, and the new American House under construction at right.

Rising

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than a quarter-century.

Plans to build at the sites, in the works since 2005, had stalled, and Barth helped bring the site to new developers.

Together, the American House and the Perkasio Commercial Center will add 16 new apartments and nearly 9,000 square feet of retail space to downtown, according to releases from the borough.

Many of the recent developments fall in line with recommendations in the comprehensive plan, including mixed-use developments in the town center, with an emphasis on retail uses for the first floor. More retail uses would increase walkability in the district and keep the area from emptying out and creating a "dead zone" after 5 o'clock when offices close. Apartments on the upper

floors, it stated, add to the consumer base for town center businesses.

New housing developments are encouraged in the plan as well — developments that fit the respective districts for land use and density and will accommodate the borough's workforce at all income levels and ages.

Plans are moving forward on several such developments including the Country Ridge development installing 18 single-family homes near Perkasio Park and the Perkasio Woods development of 144 townhomes being constructed at the site of the former Perkasio Industries plant.

Barth said these developments will bring clientele to support the new businesses in the town center and throughout the borough — Perkasio Woods especially, since it is going into a former industrial site that borders houses, Lenape Park and the Perkasio Square shopping center.

"The only reason it was



GEOFF PATTON — MONTGOMERY MEDIA

Contractors prepared the façade of an old building for a new coat of paint on Walnut Street in Perkasio Monday, Nov. 16.

zoned industrial was because this factory was built in the 1940s and [the construction] was pre-zoning," Barth said. "Normally, if you were designing a town from zero, you would put the in-

dustrial on the perimeter of the town."

Barth said he was in contact with the Bucks County Planning Commission as they prepared the plan so he could work toward the goals identified even before its formal adoption last year.

"In the process of working with the county, there were some clearly defined things even before this was finalized: redeveloping the town center, you know we have these blighted old factory buildings, bringing new businesses to the borough," Barth said.

Borough government welcomes new business

Borough council, along

with Barth, has taken some actions to encourage developments and keep lines of communication open with developers, according to Barth. The council eased some restrictions in the town center and cut construction permits in 2014 and 2015 to encourage developers to take their approved plans and get them into construction

Barth, the borough staff and representatives from council meet with developers before they invest heavily in plans to explain the process and potential problems a project may face — a forthrightness Barth said can be rare.

"The municipality would say, 'Well, give us some plans,' but they don't say

PERKASIO BY THE NUMBERS

POPULATION
 2000: 8,828
 2010: 8,511
 2013: 8,530

MEDIAN AGE
 2000: 34.9
 2010: 38.9
 2013: 41.1

AGE BREAKDOWN
Ages 20-24: 4.40 percent in 2000; 5.70 percent in 2010
Ages 25-34: 14.20 percent in 2000; 13.10 percent in 2010
Ages 35-44: 20.20 percent in 2000; 13.60 percent in 2010
Ages 45-54: 12.20 percent in 2000; 18.10 percent in 2010
Ages 55-64: 6.80 percent in 2000; 11.40 percent in 2010

RACE
 2000: 97.8 percent white
 2010: 95.8 percent white
 2013: 99 percent white

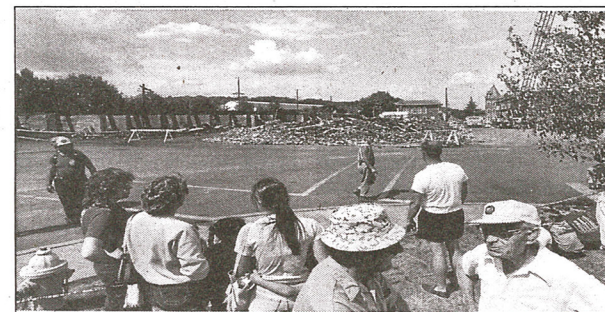
Data from American FactFinder U.S. Census

what they need to see on the plans," Barth said.

Borough Manager Andrea Coaxum said the discussions, which open an ongoing communication between the borough and the developer, benefit both parties — the developer because it is less expensive to try to meet the borough's concerns in the initial plan rather than investing more time and money later to make changes and the borough because it gets a voice early in the process.

'An evolving community'

Even with the construction of new housing and retail space, those involved understand that there is still much to be done in achieving the larger goals of revitalization.



GEOFF PATTON — MONTGOMERY MEDIA FILE PHOTO

The aftermath of a devastating 1988 fire in Perkasio.

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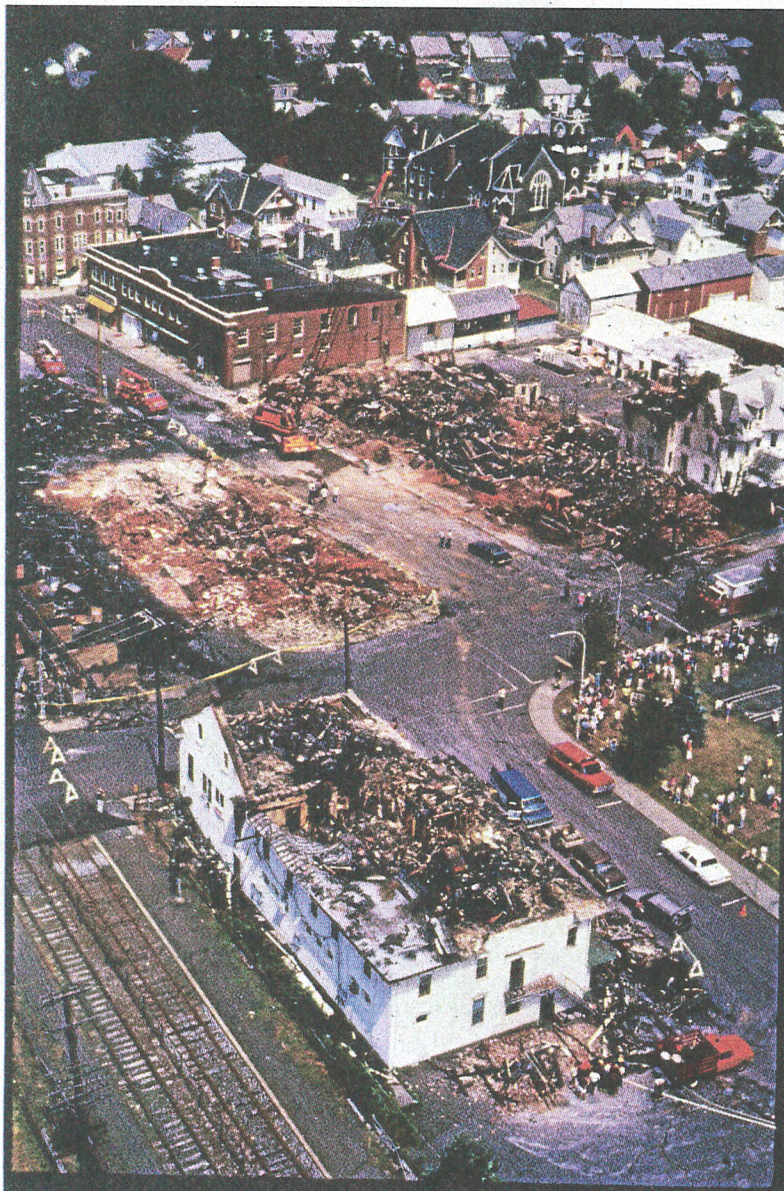
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GEOFF PATTON — MONTGOMERY MEDIA FILE PHOTO

The aftermath of a devastating 1988 fire in Perkasio.

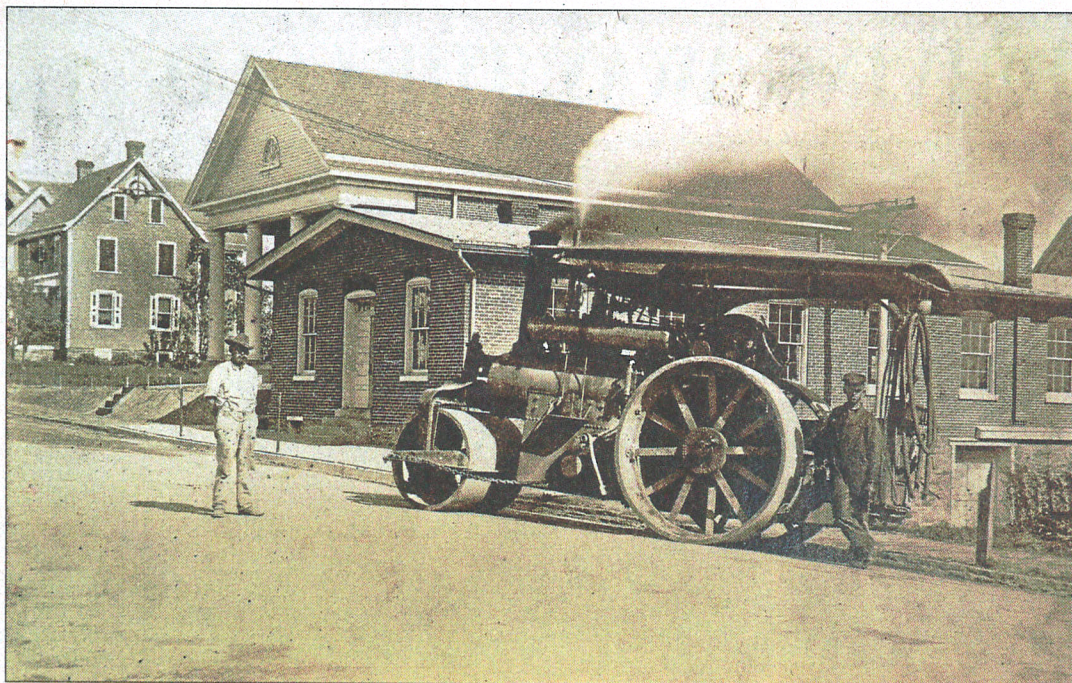


PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PERKASIE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

An early 20th century view of paving operation on South Fourth Street near West Chestnut Street in Perkasio.

MORE ONLINE

PHOTOS: To see a photo gallery of Perkasio's downtown — both past and present — visit PerkasioNews-Herald.com.

LEARN MORE: For more on Montgomery Media's Main Streets USA: Take Two series, visit PerkasioNews-Herald.com.



GEOFF PATTON — MONTGOMERY MEDIA FILE PHOTO

Amber Boyer tends to her 12-by-12-foot plot in the Perkasio Community Garden on Fifth Street Thursday, May 28, 2015. She was growing a selection of flowers and vegetables including peas beginning their climb up a trellis at center.

Rising

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"This was never meant to happen overnight," Ferry said. "This was meant to be ongoing, an evolution, not a 'Here it is. It's done. We're finished.' This is always going to be an evolving community."

Of particular interest is a still outstanding town center development included in the comprehensive plan that would take up much of the block currently occupied by Shelly's Lumber, between the new developments and borough hall,

tying together the retail areas on Market and Walnut streets. Ferry said it would be the "crowning jewel" of the downtown revitalization — if it gets built.

The borough has been talking to the Wisconsin-based company that purchased the business a few years ago to hopefully move forward with the project, Barth said.

How the new commercial spaces will be used is also yet to be seen. The comprehensive plan recommends that for a walkable, vibrant downtown, non-retail uses be kept below 10 percent of the spaces available in the

area.

Entertainment and food service are identified as being of "particular interest" in the plan, based on 2010 and 2011 surveys from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and forecasts derived from that data.

Ferry said the decision of what businesses move into those openings is ultimately the decision of the building owners, regardless of what the borough and the association would like to see. Even so, he said the current construction is a positive sign, a new building representing a significant investment the developer would not make

unless it felt there was a demand to be met.

Throughout it all, Barth said those involved in the borough have kept the big picture in mind, both where Perkasio has come from and what the community wants it to be going forward.

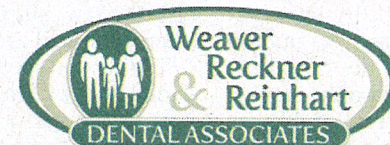
"All of these decisions that are being made, these are 50-year decisions for the town," Barth said. "[The town center] was the heart of the community a hundred years ago, so it's the phoenix out of the fire. It's rebuilding from the ashes what was destroyed and brings the heart and soul back to the downtown."



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