



An Action Plan for the Central Delaware: 2008-2018

Progress Report - November 2011

In June 2008, the Central Delaware Advocacy Group (CDAG) launched the Action Plan for the Central Delaware 2008-2018, a 10-point strategic plan to achieve key objectives of the Civic Vision for the Central Delaware. Mayor Michael Nutter embraced the Action Plan and began following its recommendations by announcing the reformation of the Penn's Landing Corporation and a Master Planning process. The City's progress has been encouraging and impressive, but no evaluation can be final until we achieve our goal of a world-class waterfront. Following is the second of CDAG's annual progress assessments.

1.) Appoint an open, accountable, effective waterfront manager:

Mayor Nutter reformed the Penn's Landing Corp. as the Delaware River Waterfront Corp. (DRWC), whose mission is to create and manage public space, and which is obligated to operate under state sunshine laws.

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The DRWC has operated in a transparent manner inclusive of public input, and has demonstrated leadership and advocacy on key issues. The DRWC has also demonstrated skill in forming strategic partnerships, securing funding and implementing projects. The DRWC Master Plan process was exemplary in all respects.

2.) Adopt clear zoning, a detailed master plan, and a coordinated regulatory policy:

In 2009, City Council, led by Councilman Frank DiCicco, passed interim zoning which would enforce some of the guidelines called for in the Civic Vision, and DRWC has commissioned, managed and now completed a Master Plan, based on the Civic Vision, that will guide development and public investment.

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A new overlay will have to replace the interim one. To realize the Civic Vision, the new overlay must be faithful, in spirit and letter, to all recommendations of the DRWC Master Plan. Because DRWC has not yet crafted standards and language for the overlay, the principles of the Master Plan remain dangerously uncodified. Also, moving forward much will depend on the City's willingness to reform the culture of piecemeal planning by variance and ordinance.

3.) Build a continuous, 7-mile trail along the Delaware riverfront:

The interim overlay calls for a setback with recreational trail and public access along the river, and a public/private partnership has built the mixed-use trail along a portion of the southern Central Delaware.

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The Master Plan establishes standards for the permanent trail. Much will depend on the Planning Commission's implementation of its Plan of Development standards and evaluation of each riverfront development proposal. Also, the city has yet to commission a survey to delineate the extent of submerged lands, or develop a comprehensive liability policy for the recreational trail to allay landowners' concerns and help ensure the future of the trail.

4.) Create new parks and improve two existing parks:

The Race Street Pier and the first phase of the Washington Avenue Green Park have been completed. Penn Treaty Park and Pulaski Park have received some design upgrades and master planning treatments.

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DRWC has identified the city-owned incinerator/festival pier site as a next-step priority. At the same time, the Department of Parks & Recreation must act decisively to upgrade Penn Treaty Park and Pulaski Park.

5.) Guarantee and ease public pedestrian and bike access to the riverfront:

The Master Plan incorporates block-and-lot plans to extend key connector streets from neighborhoods to ensure safe, high-quality, appropriately spaced access. The first phase of the Race Street Connector is complete and the second phase is being designed. DRWC is collaborating with PennDOT and others to ensure that key connectors are improved consistent with the Master Plan as I-95 reconstruction proceeds.

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It will be important for the Planning Commission and other city offices to act to ensure full access from streets to the trail as development proposals come forward, especially across the casino parcel, as well as the Conrail and Anderson parcels in the northern Central Delaware. The future of such access remains vague and precarious.

6.) Extend transit to the river:

The Delaware River Port Authority (DRPA) and the city have selected a preferred plan for trolley service along the riverfront and East Market Street corridor. The DRWC Master Plan improves on the previous DRPA plan and offers a phased mass-transit development approach.

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DRPA investment in waterfront transit is welcome, however the DRWC Master Plan should drive this process. Resolving the all-important connection across I-95 at Market and ensuring that the new transit line investment serves riverfront neighborhoods, and is more than just a casino connection, is vitally important.

7.) Extend key streets to the river:

The DRWC Master Plan identifies key streets to be extended to the river, but also recommends block-and-lot plans to establish additional, regular street access to the river from Delaware Avenue / Christopher Columbus Boulevard.

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The city has failed to call for the opening of Shackamaxon on the SugarHouse site as a real street for public access and as a control against further sprawl by the casino. City planners must stand up to development interests and extend the street grid to the river.

8.) Manage traffic and parking on the central Delaware:

DRWC has commissioned a traffic study to be completed by the end of 2011 that will identify base conditions and recommend phased remediation and traffic-calming measures. The Master Plan recommends a balanced, phased, collaborative approach to short-term and long-term transportation issues.

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Thoughtful stop-gap transit measures are necessary now, as recommended in the Master Plan. As for parking, the proposed casino parking garage would be a gargantuan structure walling off the riverfront, and the interim surface lot resembles the stadium district. Any modifications must prioritize river access, preservation of view corridors, and the quickest possible reduction in surface parking, as per the Civic Vision and Master Plan principles.

9.) Create a 100-foot greenway along the water's edge:

The Master Plan consultants concluded that a greenway of varied width – less than 100' in some places, far more in others – will benefit the ecology, enhance the public's experience, and prove more feasible than a uniform 100' greenway standard.

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A variegated greenway plan must not be used as an excuse to reduce the total public, green land area from what the original 100' greenway proposal would have created.

10.) Create a natural river's edge and restore habitat:

Mayor Nutter has actively promoted sustainability policies and the DRWC Washington Avenue Green project is an example of ecological restoration and habitat preservation. The Master Plan defines the character of the river's edge with a natural, vegetated buffer wherever possible.

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As they advocate for implementation of the Master Plan, DRWC and the Planning Commission should continue to aggressively pursue vegetated buffers that filter pollutants and manage stormwater, consistent with the City's Greenworks sustainability plan.