

Building a plan to rebuild Pennsylvania

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By Jeff Hawkes, staff writer
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Ecological calamity in the Gulf. An economy beset by joblessness and jittery investors. A growing fear we're fighting a war we can't win.

These are not the best of times, and it's easy to feel there's nothing we can do about it.

But before we throw up our hands and retreat into a shell, I'd like to share what happened Friday when nearly 600 people from around the state gathered in Lancaster to launch a campaign to revitalize Pennsylvania by saving our towns and older suburbs.

People came from places such as Scranton and Upper Darby, Wilkes-Barre and Uniontown. They included real estate agents and clergy, teachers and attorneys. And they united beneath a banner of Building One Pennsylvania.

As the summit's theme, Building One Pennsylvania also is the name of a new coalition of civic-minded groups --

10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania and Good Schools Pennsylvania among them.

Its message is that the status quo of urban sprawl, derelict schools, economic segregation, and financially teetering cities, towns and first-ring suburbs is unhealthy, unsustainable and, most of all, unacceptable.

Decades of car-centric, sprawl-inducing state and federal policies are responsible for the hollowing out of urban centers across Pennsylvania.

The coalition's goal is no less ambitious for being easily stated. Building One Pennsylvania seeks to have policy makers in Harrisburg and Washington take ownership of the problem of urban-suburban inequities and to make the changes necessary to give cities and older communities a fighting chance.

What policy changes are needed? The list is long and includes tax reform, affordable housing, transit-friendly development, equitable school funding, brownfield redevelopment,

consolidation of local services and on and on.

The coalition in coming months will begin to develop its agenda and then push lawmakers for support. Achieving reform is always a slog, and it will take patience before we see progress. But for the moment it's enough that the summit happened at all.

The cause of urban revitalization is not new. What is new is that so many groups representing diverse agendas came together from all corners of Pennsylvania, not just to talk, but to pledge to unite and make change happen.

Loren Kroh, chair of the YorkCounts revitalization organization, attended out of frustration with the way the state handicaps metropolitan York's efforts to redevelop downtowns and make public services more efficient.

"Please, please," Kroh said in addressing the summit, "let's develop a course of action that we can take to our state legislators and speak with a voice

that resonates so loudly that it can't be ignored."

Summit organizers said the work of organizing a campaign will continue this fall with meetings at the local level. Those who love their hometowns will be asked to attend and join the cause.

In the face of complex problems, people often feel powerless. But if enough people care, maybe turning around urban Pennsylvania is not one of those insolvable problems.

"They say in Pennsylvania that nothing changes," keynote speaker Myron Orfield of the Brookings Institution told the summit. But other states are achieving difficult reforms, Orfield said, and it can happen here as well.

He said the upside of a reform struggle is the way it builds relationships, energy and loyalty. And I'd add hope.

"We can't let this moment pass," Orfield said. Participants assured me they won't.

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