



## For many, Chester looks like a good bet

### It's not just the casino. Commercial & residential development are sparking optimism

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IT'S NOT EASY to bet your money on Chester, the former industrial powerhouse on the Delaware River, about halfway between Philadelphia and Wilmington.

The 4.7-square-mile city, now pocked with abandoned buildings, is known to some suburbanites as the closest place to score a bag of dope. Or for its brutal street culture, which generates tragic headlines on a regular basis despite a population of only 37,000 (down from 66,000 in 1950).

This month, the violence touched City Hall, when Mayor Wendell Butler Jr.'s nephew, Kymeen Bennett, 23, was shot and killed.

Police believe that Bennett was an innocent bystander who got caught in the crossfire when a West End neighborhood turned into a modern-day Wild West. At least 30 rounds were fired from three guns.

In addition to persistent crime, Chester has been under state financial supervision for more than a decade, its schools have been slow to improve standardized test scores and the nearest supermarket is in another town. So why are name-brand companies that had shunned the city for years starting to trickle in?

Why are residents such as Tamika Friend, a Chester High track star, purchasing new homes in the city, instead of looking elsewhere?

Why did Cheryl Stevens recently expand her southern-style restaurant in downtown Chester?

Why is a \$115 million Major League Soccer stadium being built on the waterfront?

Because, if you look beyond the headlines, you might find that Chester is Pennsylvania's dark horse city, rounding the turn and poised to finish strong. Betting on its future doesn't seem as crazy as it did just a few short years ago.

### **City on the move**

For decades, the phrase "Chester is changing" had a negative connotation: White residents muttering about the city's growing African-American population. Old heads gruffing that today's kids have no respect. Complaints about the loss of manufacturing jobs on the waterfront.

But check out some of the more recent changes in Delaware County's only city:

\_ A Best Western hotel - the first hotel to open in Chester in 35 years - and an apartment complex have been erected as part of the University Crossings project near Widener University.

\_ A TD Bank - the first new bank in 15 years - is preparing to open on the ground floor of the hotel. Butler said that talks are also underway for another hotel.

\_ Groundbreaking for a \$3 million recreation center at 7th and Madison streets took place in June. It will serve as the new home for the city's Boys and Girls Club.

\_ A mile-long riverwalk is being built along the Delaware River, and affordable houses and apartments are springing up across the city.

\_ In Highland Gardens, the former drug turf for the Boyle Street Boys gang, the city has bulldozed dozens of rickety houses and has begun replacing them with 42 contemporary three-bedroom homes starting at \$92,500. Half of Boyle Street itself was wiped out to make way for the development, called Wellington Heights.

The homes, like other developments in the city, are being built partially with public money, which keeps the selling prices low.

Income-eligible buyers can receive up to \$10,000 in down-payment and closing-cost assistance through a city program to encourage home ownership. In fact, the mortgage payments can end up being cheaper than monthly rent payments.

"Move up, not out," said Chester Housing Director Lisa Gaffney. "We want people to stay in the city."

That's exactly what Tamika Friend, 32, has in mind for herself and her two children. The 1994 Chester High grad, who ran for its championship track team, is close to settling on a new house in Union Square, with funding assistance for first-time homebuyers.

"I could have bought a house somewhere else, but I refuse to leave," Friend said. "Why leave when you want it to be a better place?"

Around the corner, at 6th and Reaney streets, Nafis Nichols, senior program coordinator for the Chester Youth Collaborative, just moved into a new twin home with the help of the city's homebuyer-assistance program. "Sold" signs are planted in his neighbors' fresh green lawns.

Nichols, 24, a Chester native who graduated from Delaware State University, said that the decision to raise his family there was "a no-brainer."

"Chester's home," Nichols said. "I know that Chester is on the rise and I want to be a part of that. I see opportunities for people, a community where people want to be and enjoy themselves."

### **Economic recovery**

Chester has long been plagued by budget deficits. But an influx of slots revenue from Harrah's Chester Casino & Racetrack has helped the city balance its books, establish a capital-improvement fund, purchase new fire trucks, fill vacancies in the 100-member police department and put money toward the recreation center.

Since Harrah's opened in January 2007, the city has received about \$33.3 million in slots money. The city expects to get \$12.5 million this year - nearly twice as much as it will collect in real-estate taxes.

While other cities are searching for ways to close huge budget shortfalls, Chester has held the line on property taxes and has reduced its earned-income tax rate in recent years.

"That's pretty significant in light of the economic conditions," said Thomas Moore, Butler's chief of staff. "Look at what's happening in Philly and at cities across the board. How many municipalities were able to reduce the tax burden on its residents in this fiscal climate?"

Chester is still classified as an Act 47 fiscally distressed city, but that could change in the next three to five years, according to Dan Connelly, associate director at Fairmount Capital Advisors, the firm assigned to Chester by the state to assist with its financial recovery.

"The economic development activities are really bearing fruit right now and you can see it in their operating budget," Connelly said. "Financially, they're in a much improved position."

### **Breaking the cycle**

As the soccer stadium construction continues alongside the Commodore Barry Bridge, new ramps are being built to connect I-95 to Chester's Route 291, which will likely bring more traffic into a city that sometimes feels like a ghost town. That, in turn, could spur more development.

"Traffic count is what drives commercial development," said David Sciocchetti, executive director of the Chester Economic Development Authority.

"There's construction going on everywhere," Sciocchetti said, as he surveyed the progress of the riverwalk near the stadium. "This is going to be the best place on the waterfront to be in the whole region when we're done."

You'll also find cranes at 10th Street and Avenue of the States, where the Chester Towers have been demolished.

The dilapidated high-rise apartments that housed 300 seniors and disabled residents will be replaced with four-story apartments, retail space and possibly an arts and cultural center.

In downtown Chester, where boarded-up businesses are interspersed with rehabbed buildings, Cheryl Stevens, the owner of Cheryl's Southern Style Restaurant & Catering, says that business has been picking up.

"It's really catching on, I'll tell ya," said Stevens, who learned to cook her award-winning soul food as a child at her grandmother's home on 2nd Street. "There's been some late, late nights and early, early mornings."

At the Wharf at Rivertown - a former power plant that was converted into office space for Wells Fargo, Synegy and the Philadelphia Union, the MLS soccer team that will begin playing next year - further expansion is planned.

And city officials remain hopeful that a stalled proposal to build a supermarket at 15th Street and Highland Avenue will eventually materialize. Chester hasn't had a full-service grocery since the West End Food Center closed in 2001, partially due to out-of-control shoplifting.

Chavon Hodges, 35, recently moved from Delaware into Chester's Union Square neighborhood, where snazzy tan houses with clean white sidewalks are located across the street from condemned buildings with shattered windows.

"I'm liking the house," Hodges said of her new four-bedroom home. "The neighborhood just needs to be worked on."

Prostitution remains a problem there, according to Hodges, who attended a community meeting this month at New Jerusalem Church to discuss the future of the neighborhood, north of the stadium site.

Fighting crime and cleaning up Chester's image remains one of the biggest hurdles to its revitalization. Even some cops, fearing retaliation against their families, want to leave the city. They've asked officials to lift the residency-requirement for city employees.

There has been some progress in reducing crime. The Boyle Street Boys are long gone. In May, federal authorities indicted 21 members of an alleged drug gang that operated in that same neighborhood.

But stanching the drug trade sometimes feels like a high-stakes game of whack-a-mole, said Chester police Chief Floyd Lewis. "Usually, it crops up in other areas of the city," he said.

There have been nine homicides so far this year. Last year, the city recorded 19 homicides. In 2007, there were 27.

While the murder rate may be declining, investigators are still getting little help from residents in solving major crimes.

"It's our biggest burden, unfortunately," police Capt. Joseph Massi said. "There are times when we get some tips from the public, but nothing consistent. It's sure as hell not as consistent as I would like to see."

The city has been beefing up the police presence in targeted areas, but Butler, a former police commissioner himself, said that organizations such as the Chester Youth Collaborative and Christian Coalition Against Violence are crucial to shaping the next generation of adults.

"Everybody has to come on board to try to do what they can to suppress violence," Butler said. "You can't just lay it at the door of the police department and say, 'Solve this.' "

In order for Chester to fully realize it's potential, Friend said, parents and youth coordinators need to get through to children now - before they grow up - and convince them that a life of crime is not their only option.

"They don't have to become what everybody says they have to become," Friend said, "just because they're from Chester."