

## 1. Place

The downtown of Brownsville, Pennsylvania was once the beating heart of commerce and industry in southwestern Pennsylvania. Today, the district's unique historic structures stand largely vacant. The Brownsville Area Revitalization Corporation (BARC), in partnership with local businesses, charitable foundations, and the DCED program, is working to restore Brownsville's downtown for commercial use so that it can be enjoyed by visitors and residents for years to come.

The story of Brownsville is colored by the persistence of a community that has kept faith against seemingly insurmountable odds, and today the town stands in an ideal position for widespread redevelopment. Due to eminent domain filings from The Redevelopment Authority of the County of Fayette, large portions of Brownsville's downtown have recently come under public ownership after an extended period of unavailability and vacancy. These historic buildings are a major part of this community's cultural heritage and identity, and for the first time in 20 years they are available for purchase and restoration. The prospect of these buildings being reopened has sparked business growth in the surrounding neighborhood. The Brownsville Area Revitalization Corporation (BARC) *Keystone Project* will capitalize on the opportunity presented by this momentum and protect the future of this district by increasing residential capacity and developing a community hub in the center of The Downtown Commercial District.

BARC is a 501c3 non profit community development corporation (CDC). BARC's offices are located in the Historic Flatiron Building located along the Monongahela River and the National Road Heritage Corridor in Brownsville's Downtown Commercial Historic District. Since 1989, BARC has worked to improve Brownsville's economy by restoring buildings in the downtown and utilizing other resources in the community, such as promoting recreational use of the Monongahela River, hosting community festivals, supporting local artists and musicians, and operating museums. BARC's Keystone Revitalization Project will directly address a number of the community's needs and be a step towards the actualization of BARC's mission of economic development. The project is supported by local businesses in the community as well as The Brownsville Area Chamber of Commerce and Brownsville Area High School's Students in Action Club. The project is also supported by a number of regional organizations such as The Redevelopment Authority of Fayette County, River Towns Program, and The Historic National Road Corridor. Brownsville Family Pharmacy will also be contributing towards the completion of this project with a cash donation towards the renovation of their new commercial space.

Brownsville has experienced several cycles of growth and transition with the rise and fall of regional industries, and during the peak of the region's industrial era from the early 1900's to the late 1960's, Brownsville's population was approximately 10,000. After the departure of industry from the region, population and prosperity both began to decline. As of the 2010

census, the population was 2,539 and the population growth rate was -7.8%. This decline in population has created a number of difficulties for the community, prime among them being the number of abandoned buildings in the downtown commercial district. The 2000 census reported that 29.2% of households earned less than \$10,000 annually, and that 11.7% of residents received Public Assistance, while 34% received Social Security. Reportedly, 76.5% of Brownsville Area High School students graduated, while the dropout rate was 4%. Most symptomatic of decline is the rate of abandonment and blight in the downtown – Brownsville’s commercial district houses about 15 blighted or underused buildings, many of which contribute to the district’s national historic designation.

At present between 69 Market Street and 15 Market Street, BARC has restored four buildings that are now occupied both commercially and residentially. These four renovated buildings are used for a variety of purposes. In the Flatiron Building, 69 Market Street, BARC hosts the Frank L. Melega Art Museum, as well as The Brownsville Heritage Visitors Center Museum and the BARC offices. BARC also rents space to tenants in the building, including Jeff Jones Capture Inc. (a photo exhibit and art gallery), and most recently the workshops of two artists.

Down further along the strip in 33 Market Street two local businesses thrive – The Vulcan Insurance Agency and the Market Street Performing Arts Academy, where Dr. Fred Lapisardi hosts “Kindermusik”, a program that teaches music to children. Just a few buildings down the street stands the Brownsville Family Pharmacy and the future location of Brownsville’s Community Cultural Center, the site of the Keystone Project. BARC also owns two other properties in the downtown historic district: the Gazalie and Taylor Building, both of which are renovated and in commercial use. By providing low rates for the rental of our commercial and residential space, BARC encourages new businesses to open in the downtown district, and the completion of this project will allow us to encourage further residential use of this space.

Neighboring this strip on either side are existing residences and local businesses. One former bank building has been converted into apartments, and Fiddle’s Classic Diner, one of the longest running businesses in Fayette County, abides as an icon of Brownsville’s past. On the corner of Market Street and Snowdon Square, a new restaurant, Mitchell’s Café, opened this August and has already increased the business traffic in the downtown district. On the north side of the strip, the Gazalie Building houses the offices of Team Humanity, a start-up clothing company that sells to an online market, and on the other side of the street, Nemaocolin Castle overlooks the town and welcomes visitors. Improvements to the Market Street Strip would bring a center back to a community that has a great number of existing resources and would serve to

protect the fledgling businesses and residences that have already invested in the future of the district.

A major portion of Brownsville's population currently occupies public housing, which along with a high number of social security recipients lowers the community's average income. Brownsville Borough currently contains several publicly funded housing developments, whose occupants would be served by the community cultural center. The rehabilitation of the downtown will be complete when a higher percentage of Brownsville's population inhabits the district, and the Keystone Project would be a first step toward this goal. The apartments could attract a variety of residents such as young professionals, and employees of local businesses and manufacturing companies, such as Brownsville Marine Products.

Support for revitalization is reflected by every age group in Brownsville. A team of students from Brownville Area High School have recently sparked an initiative to reuse the lot across the street from the Keystone Revitalization Project as a community park. The park will include a stage that would be usable for outdoor events, and would provide green space in the heart of the downtown, increasing livability and promoting more commercial use of the area. Plans are underway with Brownsville Borough, the Redevelopment Authority of Fayette County, BARC and other local partners to complete construction as early as next year. The pairing of the Keystone Project and the Brownsville Park would create an attractive community hub available year round for current and future generations of Brownsville residents.

## **2. Problem**

The abandonment of buildings in the downtown has led to a number of challenges for the community as it moves forward, including a decline in population, a rise in vandalism, and a high percentage of vacant buildings. However, the downtown district has begun to flourish in the past few years after eminent domain filings from the county made the buildings available for purchase after an extended period of unavailability. Growth is increasing exponentially as a number of projects focus on the district's massive untapped potential and new businesses open in the district. The completion of Route 43 makes Brownsville more accessible to visitors, connecting it to the larger communities of Pittsburgh and Morgantown.

A primary struggle for Brownsville's downtown has been a low residential population. The decline of the industrial era created a loss of businesses and residences in the downtown area beginning around 1960. In 1990 an additional complication was created by a speculator who purchased property without maintaining code requirements, allowing the buildings to further deteriorate. The Keystone Project would directly address this core issue by providing convenient and affordable housing for the average Brownsvillian, and attracting residents from the surrounding area.

Vandalism in the downtown inflates Brownsville's total crime index and gives it an unwarranted reputation as a dangerous community. The abandonment of buildings in the downtown encourages vandalism, and according to *areavibes.com*, 2,359 of every 100,000 residents will suffer a property related crime in Brownsville each year -- that's 21% higher than Pennsylvania's average. Brownsville's violent crime rate, however, is 63 points lower than Pennsylvania's average, and 83 points lower than the national average. In recent years the development of a Neighborhood Watch program has greatly reduced vandalism, and increasing residential and commercial traffic in the downtown would reduce it even further.

Local realtors in the surrounding area make a point of avoiding the downtown when showing homes to potential residents, because its appearance of abandonment is undesirable for potential buyers. The Keystone Project would improve the appearance of the downtown, and by extension boost the property value of the surrounding community while facilitating a higher population both residentially and commercially in the district. This revitalization would reduce the potential for vandalism and alter the perception of total abandonment, making Brownsville a more attractive and livable community for current and incoming residents.

### **3. Project**

The Keystone Project will renovate two BARC owned buildings, 25 and 27 Market Street. The 27 Market Street building suffers from blight and abandonment, and 25 Market currently houses The Brownsville Family Pharmacy and a single apartment, with three additional apartments in need of renovation. When the Keystone Project is complete, the pharmacy will be relocated to 27 Market, while 25 Market is converted into a community cultural center with a theater. This project has been encouraged by the pharmacy, and has been supported and designed by the MacLaughlin Cornelius and Filoni architectural firm. In addition to the commercial renovations, seven vacant apartments above the commercial space will be restored, and the buildings will obtain LEED certification.

The first phase of this project; the restoration of the roof, the façade, structural repairs in the ground floor of 27 Market Street and the installation of LEED certified heating and cooling units to both buildings will be covered in part by contributions garnered through the Neighborhood Assistance Special Program Priorities. Architectural construction drawings are currently in process, and are estimated to be completed by November 15. Top priority for the project is stabilization of the basement of 27 Market Street to be completed by December 15. Installation of utilities will continue throughout the winter, to be completed by March. Exterior work on the roof and facade are expected to be completed in April, weather permitting. After the completion of exterior work, interior work will begin for the second phase of the project. The interior commercial space will be renovated by May of 2013, and the space will be opened early

in June. Residential spaces are scheduled to open by November, pending funding for the second phase of the Keystone Project.

BARC, as aforementioned, will be partnering with a variety of community and regional organizations in order to complete The Keystone Project. The adjacent vacant property owned by the county has been studied by the Redevelopment Authority and will soon be ready to market to new owners. The Keystone Project will be an example of how restoration and preservation of Brownsville's historic structures is viable for future investors. The redevelopment and adaptation of these buildings will create a commercial district that will last for generations to come, preserving the work of artisans who devoted their talents to its creation.

#### **4. Proposed Outcomes**

BARC has prioritized the Keystone Project as top priority for the district to foster a positive environment of change. Having a significant number of residents living in this part of the district will make an inestimable impact on the community, which has become accustomed to seeing these buildings vacant. It will also have a distinct and measurable impact on DCED defined community impact measures. The goal of this project is to have 3 of the 7 apartments rented by December of 2013.

The completion of this project will be an uplifting asset for Brownsville and for BARC. BARC is currently run and operated primarily on a volunteer basis through the cooperation of several government programs such as Americorps National, Americorps VISTA, Senior Employment Agency, and Southwestern PA Agency for Aging. BARC currently employs a financial officer and after the completion of this project, BARC would have the capacity to employ two more people to work on the management of the company. The creation of these new positions would greatly increase BARC's capacity to continue working to improve the district, and would be a way to quantifiably measure the impact of the Keystone Project within our own organization.

The Keystone Project would improve the downtown in a variety of measurable ways. In a block that currently holds a single renovated apartment, there would now be eight, providing housing for as many as twenty residents. This influx of available housing will increase Brownsville's overall population, and more importantly make the downtown commercial district a more viable outlet for continued development. An increased residential presence in the downtown would hamper vandalism, which would in turn make it a more attractive option for potential new residents. The project would reduce the total amount of abandonment and blight in the district, completely restoring a building that has been in disuse for several years. The project would also impact neighborhood statistics such as increasing the median property value by as much as \$2,000, from \$65,520 to around \$67,000. It would also decrease Brownsville's residential vacancy rate by about 4% and create two quality jobs as defined by DCED. The

currently vacant 27 Market Street will employ eight people on the completion of this project, while 25 Market Street will employ two. The project would reduce Business Property Vacancy rate by 10% (from 30% to 20%), and would reduce the total crime index from 2591 to 2450, which would put Brownsville below the PA average. Finally, and most measurably, the project would reduce the percentage of buildings in the downtown suffering abandonment and blight from 63.6% to 54.54%.