

# PA must invest in older towns, not urban sprawl

**G**len Lyon, once a bustling coal town in Newport Township, captured the hearts of people across the nation in 1948 when it provided the location for Irving Pichel's film, "The Miracle of the Bells."

It's a touching story about the devotion of a Hollywood press agent to the memory of a young actress who died before the release of her first film.

To create a national demand for the release of the movie, the agent purchases a day's worth of bell-ringing from the local churches. But in the middle of the publicity stunt a miracle occurs at the Church of St. Michael the Archangel and the bells continue to ring for four full days.

That miracle, originating in the simple goodness of a young movie actress born and raised in Glen



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Lyon, transforms the community from spiritual poverty to faith, hope, and love for each other.

Sadly, St. Michael's is going to need another miracle. The church is targeted for the wrecking ball within the year. Too few Catholics reside in the town to support it.

There is something tragic about the demolition of the church, and it goes far beyond the loss of a historical structure that once served as a spiritual lifeline for generations of coal miners and their fam-

ilies.

Like the town's breaker, which was destroyed by fire in 1974, the loss of St. Michael's will be yet another blow to a community that has never fully recovered from hard times because Pennsylvania prefers to invest in suburban sprawl instead of older, more established towns.

The Brookings Institution's recent report, 'Back To Prosperity: A Competitive Agenda For Renewing Pennsylvania,' traces the decline of towns like Glen Lyon to the state's governance structure which works against strategic planning for business development, open-space conservation and growth supported by public infrastructure.

Instead of investing in these small communities by creating new jobs and wealth, the state tar-

gets its spending on infrastructure and corporate parks in once rural areas.

That strategy only serves to transfer jobs and residents from the established communities to new suburban ones.

Why aren't the jobs and wealth being steered to new development in the older, established communities where 58 percent of Pennsylvanians still live?

Such "smart growth" has the potential to be more beneficial than suburban sprawl.

It places homes, stores and office space in a compact area, which is energy efficient and environmentally sound.

It encourages walking, which, in turn, can lead to a decline in the rising rate of obesity.

It promotes upward social mobility by attracting young, highly ed-

ucated residents, who currently compose the 'brain drain' leaving Pennsylvania.

The key to success is persuading our state legislators to rethink the current strategy for new development, which targets rural and suburban areas.

Janet Milkman, president and CEO of 10,000 Friends of Pennsylvania, a statewide alliance that promotes sound land use, reminds us that focusing on jobs or population growth wherever we can get them is not the answer — creating good jobs and quality housing in places where people live now is.

Only then can we revitalize once prosperous towns like Glen Lyon, whose rich history and spiritual legacy make it a far more valuable community than any sprawling new one.

## COMMENTARY

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