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A solid plan must come first for the waterfront

By Harris Steinberg

Cities around the world are striking it rich on their waterfronts.

No, it's not about bringing casinos to the river's edge. Rather, it's about gambling on prescient planning to turn underused natural assets into gleaming exemplars of urban living.

From Barcelona to Vancouver, cities are weaving social and economic gold from the remains of industrial sackcloth, creating the definitive public places of the 21st century.

And Philadelphia is about to miss the boat.

With more than 38 miles of contiguous river frontage along the Delaware and Schuylkill, we are blessed with abundant opportunities. And while we once stood as an international model for visionary waterfront urban design, we have long since sat idly as random, market-driven development has begun to gobble up the remains of our shoreline.

While other cities are creating riverfronts with public esplanades, boat launches and recreation around which housing, businesses and offices are developed, Philadelphia has become the national example of how not to do waterfront planning.

From the history of failed development at Penn's Landing to the glut of speculative towers soon to flood the Delaware, we are encouraging the diminishment of our odds of creating a vibrant new identity for 21st-century Philadelphia.

Several plans for discrete portions of our waterfront have emerged that range from the visionary to the prosaic. Still, we lack both a singular public vision for reestablishing an urban relationship to the water (the wharves by and large departed more than 50 years ago) and a mechanism to implement sound waterfront planning.

Take, for example, the 2001 North Delaware Riverfront plan by the landscape architectural firm of Field Operation - a smart concept for new homes, recreational spaces and cultural institutions north of the Ben Franklin Bridge. This organic road map combines sound environmental principles with sensible planning as it reaches both under Interstate 95 and along the river to reimagine long-severed links between the river wards and the Delaware. Now the plan collects dust on a shelf at the Planning Commission.

At the other extreme is Robert A.M. Stern's plan for the former Philadelphia Naval Shipyard - a fussy and self-contained design for a gated community disconnected from Center City and South Philadelphia with no sense of its signal position at the confluence of the two rivers. What should be a crescendo in a great string of urban waterfront parks a la Chicago's lakefront is little more than a tepid marina and office park.

In between, we have an opportunistic no-man's-land in which developers (not to mention hopeful casino operators) are rapidly eroding our potential for a world-class waterfront.

Indeed, in the last two months alone, the city Historical Commission has reviewed and alarmingly approved plans for new high-rise residential towers along the Delaware River. There is another way.

The Penn's Landing Principles of 2003 called for a master plan for the entirety of Philadelphia's shorelines - a plan that maintains public access to all river edges. The more than 700 citizens who participated in the Penn's Landing forums emphatically cried "slow down, what's the rush?" when it came to sound waterfront design and planning.

Mayor Street wisely responded with a call for the creation of a River City - a concept drawn from the language of the forums that has yet to flower.

To ensure that we do this correctly, let's place a moratorium on waterfront development for one year. During that time, let's create a truly public waterfront plan that stretches from the Poquessing Creek at the border of Bensalem on the North Delaware to the upper reaches of Andorra on the Schuylkill.

Let's create a waterfront plan for all Philadelphians that balances private development and the public interest; one that marries the best of contemporary waterfront planning with Philadelphia's ineffable style.

Then, let's create a waterfront ordinance that codifies this plan along with a nonpartisan waterfront commission charged with protecting the public good.

Our river edges are too important to be diluted by unchecked development and political interests. We can choose between being a shining example of 21st-century urbanism or remain a cautionary tale.

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