

## II. Introduction & Background Information

### A. Diamond City Partnership

The Diamond City Partnership of Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania, was formed in 2001 as a result of a series of community forums regarding the future of Downtown Wilkes-Barre. During these community forums, or visioning sessions, six Strategies for Change were identified and the Diamond City Partnership designated to spearhead efforts to pursue the mandated Strategies. The Partnership is comprised of representatives of the City government, Downtown residents, educational and religious organizations, businesses, and social and cultural institutions, allied in the implementation of the Strategies for Change.



#### The Visioning Process

The Downtown Wilkes-Barre Visioning Process began January 31, 2001, with a stated intent of moving toward a redefinition and revitalization of Downtown Wilkes-Barre. Facilitated by the Pennsylvania Downtown Center, a nonprofit organization for the promotion of traditional downtowns throughout the state, Wilkes-Barre's visioning process included public meetings at which over 500 area residents participated.

In the first public meeting, participants identified qualities that Downtown was perceived currently to have, as well as qualities that the participants wanted to be able to associate with Downtown in the year 2010. The qualities identified made clear that the community desired a change that would create a vibrant, active community center in Downtown.

The second public meeting focused on performing a Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) analysis regarding the revitalization of Downtown. This analysis identified the riverfront, Public Square, local colleges and Wilkes-Barre's historic architecture as strengths. Weaknesses identified included a perceived lack of cooperation and long-range planning among Wilkes-Barre leaders, a lack of attention to infrastructure items like lighting and street cleaning, and a lack of Downtown activities and outside marketing. Key opportunities identified were the creation of niche retail, riverfront development, and the possibility of working with local colleges in planning and development. Perceived threats included a declining population and lack of community involvement in revitalization efforts.

In the third public meeting, participants reviewed a draft vision statement prepared by the Pennsylvania Downtown Center and considered six Solutions for Change: (1) the creation of a formal market-driven development plan; (2) the creation of a voluntary business improvement district; (3) the facilitation of new business development and promotion; (4) the creation of a higher education and downtown task force; (5) the creation of a Downtown residents' association; and (6) the preservation of Downtown's historic resources.

## DCP Working Groups

Within the Diamond City Partnership are working groups focused on each of the six Strategies for Change, as well as a seventh working group dedicated to Communications. The working groups are formed of, and headed by, community volunteers. The charge to shape the future of Downtown Wilkes-Barre is thus, as it should be, an indigenous enterprise.

Working Group 1 has focused on creating a voluntary Business Improvement District, and has implemented such programs as the Clean & Green Program, funded by the business community, which works to keep Downtown streets clean and safe.

Working Group 2 has created a Downtown Residents' Association, focused on those issues of primary concern for individuals living Downtown, including safety, cleanliness, enforcement of laws and codes, the availability of housing, the enhancement of the relationship between permanent residents and the temporary residents brought to the City by local colleges, the viability and efficiency of transportation, and the enhancement of Downtown amenities such as parks and events.

Working Group 3 has concentrated on preserving and enhancing Downtown's rich supply of historic resources, working with the Wilkes-Barre City Council, Greater Wilkes-Barre Chamber, and the Luzerne County Historical Society to produce a draft overlay ordinance protecting Downtown's historic sites and properties.

Working Group 4 has created a Higher Education/Downtown Task Force, combining King's College, Wilkes University, and their respective neighbors to address issues of mutual concern.

Working Group 5 has targeted the creation of a formal, market-driven development plan for Downtown, of which this Strategic Market Development Plan is the result.

Working Group 6 has concentrated on the formation of a Main Street program and the hiring of a Main Street Manager under the auspices of Pennsylvania's Main Street Program, in order to facilitate the revitalization of Downtown.

The Diamond City Partnership's commitment to Downtown Wilkes-Barre's future is reflective of the community that is its driving force.

### ***Six Revitalization Strategies***

*Group 1: Creation of a Voluntary Business Improvement District*

*Group 2: Creation of a Downtown Residents' Association*

*Group 3: Preservation and protection of Downtown's historic resources*

*Group 4: Creation of a Higher Education/Downtown Task Force*

*Group 5: Creation of a formal, market-driven Downtown Development Plan*

*Group 6: Facilitation of new business development and promotion*

## B. Study Background/Objectives & Goals

During 1992, a study of Downtown was completed for a group of stakeholders known as the Downtown Committee. The study focused on the physical aspects of Downtown, and resulted in several recommendations that were implemented including the redevelopment of Pomeroy's and the Stegmaier site. Since that time, the market and contextual conditions of Downtown have changed substantially resulting in the need for the current study.

This Strategic Market Development Plan was prepared by Lincoln Property Company (LPC), in conjunction with team members Gibbs Planning Group (GPG) and Chance Management Advisors, Inc. (CMA), to assist DCP in building upon the revitalization efforts made to date. The purpose is to create a reality-based plan to enhance Downtown's positive attributes, viability and economic health, and transform Downtown into an active, livable center. Retail and entertainment, hotels, office space, education and cultural institutions, parking and public transportation, and residential development all form components of this Plan.

The Plan is the end product of a three-phase process. In Phase One, the team members collected primary and secondary information during a series of work steps that included identifying Downtown stakeholders to participate in the process; the establishment and conducting of focus groups as part of the study; determining the physical and demographic attributes of the area; surveying the existing Downtown businesses, services and real estate market; reviewing current and planned Downtown programs and projects; collecting information on markets in competition with Downtown; and reviewing Downtown's business climate and politics.

Phase Two involved the assessment and analysis of the collected data in order to produce an implementable plan for Downtown with specific recommendations. Work steps during this phase included analysis of Downtown's demographics, real estate market, ongoing and proposed projects, zoning and land use, infrastructure, retail potential, market characteristics, and parking.

LINCOLN  
PROPERTY  
COMPANY



In Phase Three, the team created the Plan, specifically focusing on identifying existing Downtown anchors, potential and optimum tenant mix, market niche and lease opportunities, zoning and infrastructure improvements, events and activities, developer incentive programs, governmental and quasi-public enhancement of Downtown's business climate, and evaluation criteria for monitoring the implementation of changes to Downtown.

The Strategic Market Development Plan is a market-tested roadmap for change that incorporates the perspectives of all types of community members, whether business, institutional or residents. Direct public participation in part took the form of 17 focus groups comprised of representatives from the arts and entertainment sector, high-rise building managers, Downtown office tenants, the realty and residential development sector, Downtown institutions, high schools, King's College and Wilkes University, the *Times-Leader*, WBRE-TV, City Council, the Downtown Residents Association, interested citizens, outside restaurateurs and retailers, and Downtown retailers.

During the focus groups, a number of common themes developed as well as specific suggestions for change. These themes and suggestions included:

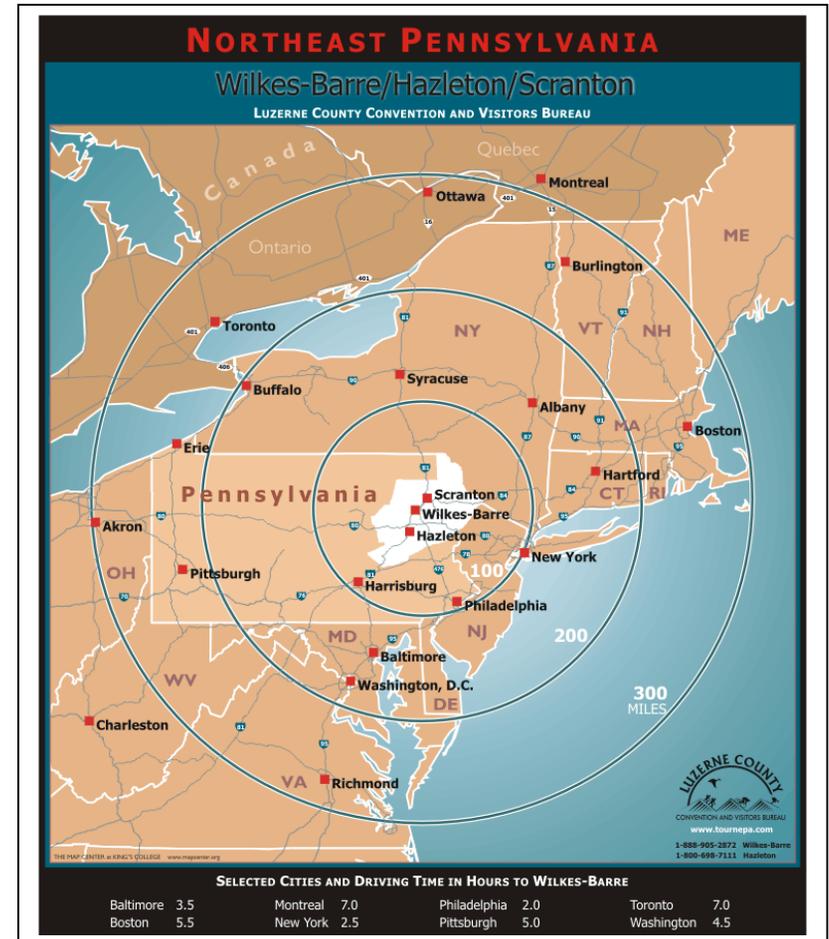
- A need to resolve City politics and establish cooperation among City leaders.
- A need for consensus-building as the basis for change.
- A need to foster optimism.
- A need to include the City's diverse populations in any plan for change.
- A need to create a business-friendly climate by creating a tax structure reflective of business needs.
- A need to be selective regarding those businesses attracted to the area.
- A need for attention to the physical attributes of Downtown: cleanliness, safety, lighting, landscaping, signage, façades, pedestrian usability, parking, and public transportation.
- A need for a variety of retail venues from small unique shops to magnet stores: restaurants, cafés and coffee shops, movie theater, bookstore, grocery store, bars and nightclubs, ice skating rink, year-round farmers' market.
- A need for quality cultural and entertainment venues, fostering the arts and highlighting Wilkes-Barre's historical and architectural value through galleries, performances, tours, and downtown events such as an annual First Night celebration.
- A need to ensure key projects are pursued, such as the redevelopment of the Sterling Hotel, the creation of a master plan and maintenance program for Public Square, the development of the planned incubation center, a program for Main Street, and strategic development of riverfront uses and attractions such as the Susquehanna Landing project.
- A need to work with Wilkes University and King's College in planning development and change, including housing solutions.
- A need to attract young families to the City as residents.

## C. Location

Wilkes-Barre is located in the Wyoming Valley, in northeastern Pennsylvania. It is almost equally distant from New York City—approximately 120 miles—and Philadelphia—110 miles—and is as close to Ithaca, New York, home to Cornell University, as it is to State College, home of Penn State. Wilkes-Barre is approximately 310 miles from Boston, Massachusetts, 575 miles from Charlotte, North Carolina, and 220 miles from Washington, D.C. Wilkes-Barre is part of Luzerne County, and neighboring municipalities include Scranton, Hazleton, Kingston and Pittston, where the Scranton/Wilkes-Barre International Airport is located. Nestled among mountains and proximate to beautiful rural landscapes, Wilkes-Barre serves as an urban magnet in an unspoiled region, providing the area with tremendous educational and cultural resources.

Greater Wilkes-Barre has Triple A baseball, the Wilkes-Barre/Scranton Penguins American Hockey League franchise, and nationally ranked golf courses. Ground transportation includes easy access to I-81, I-476, I-84 and I-380. The area is also served by two Class I railroads, Canadian Pacific and Norfolk Southern, and shortline service is provided by Reading, Northern and by the Luzerne County Rail Authority. The area is served by the Wilkes-Barre Scranton International Airport which is used by US Airways, COMAIR, Continental Express, Northwest, United Express and US Airways Express. Greyhound and Trailways buslines as well as Martz Trailways provide bus service to Philadelphia and New York City. The City itself is serviced by the Luzerne County Transportation Authority, which provides public bus service with its central hub located in Wilkes-Barre.

Downtown Wilkes-Barre is particularly rich in educational and cultural resources. Local educational resources include Wilkes University, King's College, and Luzerne County Community College's Corporate Learning Center. The F.M. Kirby Center for the Performing Arts, the Sordoni Art Gallery, and the Luzerne County Historical Society are among the important cultural institutions for which Downtown Wilkes-Barre is home.



Complementing area parks and natural areas, indoor recreational opportunities are provided by Downtown's YMCA, Catholic Youth Center, and Jewish Community Center. Public Square, in the heart of Downtown, is the locus for significant community festivals, and Kirby Park along the Susquehanna River is the site of outdoor sports and activities as well as the area's Fourth of July celebration.

There are six industrial and office parks in the Greater Wilkes-Barre area, including Crestwood Industrial Park (1050 acres of industrial), Hanover Industrial Estates (962 acres of mixed use), Hanover Crossings (211 acres of mixed use), the Corporate Center at East Mountain (200 acres of ultra-service business), Highland Park (mixed use), and Diamond Corporate Park (Downtown Wilkes-Barre).

The Wilkes-Barre school district is comprised of seven elementary schools, a middle school, and three public high schools. Alternative elementary education is provided by the schools of Sacred Heart, St. Aloysius, St. Boniface Interparochial, St. Mary's, St. Nicholas-St. Mary's, and SS Peter and Paul. Parochial high school education is provided by Bishop Hoban High School. The Wilkes-Barre Academy provides nonsectarian elementary education. There is also the Wilkes-Barre Area Vocational-Technical High School in Plains.

## **D. Wilkes-Barre History**

The history of Wilkes-Barre is rich and varied. Settled by Connecticut Yankees, Delaware Indians and followers of William Penn at competing times, Wilkes-Barre was named for two Englishmen who supported American rights against their own government. Intimately involved through the mining of anthracite coal with the early formation of labor unions, Wilkes-Barre was first called the Diamond City after the black diamonds of coal found in the area. The City's coat of arms features a beehive symbolizing the historical and contemporary industriousness of the Greater Wilkes-Barre area.

The charter for the Wilkes-Barre area was given by King Charles I of England to the colony of Connecticut in 1662. In 1681, King Charles II gave a charter to William Penn for land that included the Wyoming Valley. Delaware Indians were permitted to occupy the land until the 1750s, when population and agricultural needs led to the formation of the Connecticut-based Susquehanna Company, formed for the purpose of purchasing the land from the Delawares. In 1762, settlers from the Company came to plant and build shelters, subsequently returning to Connecticut until the following year. Toward the end of that year, 1763, the settlement was attacked by Iroquois Indians and the land was abandoned by both the settlers and the Indians.

Pennsylvania first laid a claim to the land in 1765 when it established an Indian trading post there. A survey of the area was done in 1768, and Pennsylvania settlers arrived. In 1769, however, more settlers were sent by Connecticut's Susquehanna Company. Arrested twice by the Pennsylvania settlers, the Connecticut settlers returned as soon as they were free on bail, and were joined by two hundred additional settlers led by Major John Durkee. They built Fort Durkee near the site of the Darte Center for the Performing Arts. Major Durkee was the one to call the area

“Wilkesbarre”, after Isaac Barre, who opposed the Stamp Act while a member of the British Parliament, and John Wilkes, an Englishman who was known for advocating colonial rights.

Fighting between the Pennsylvania and Connecticut settlers became known as the first Yankee-Pennamite War, and centered around Fort Durkee, and Fort Wyoming, built by the Pennsylvanians near the site of Wilkes University. Ultimately, the Yankees prevailed, the final battle taking place in 1775. The Wyoming Valley area was made part of Connecticut.

During the Revolutionary War, settlers formed troops to serve under George Washington, leaving the settlement without adequate defenses: a massacre of settlers by the British, aided by Indians, known as the Wyoming Massacre, was perpetrated in 1778. After the Revolutionary War, the area was ruled by a court to belong to Pennsylvania, though individual Connecticut settlers’ claims to land were to be honored. Another Yankee-Pennamite War ensued in 1783, which Connecticut won, but in 1786 Pennsylvania formed Luzerne County and ultimately the court’s ruling was followed.



Anthracite coal began to be mined on outcrops in the Wilkes-Barre area in 1776. The coal was first used industrially in 1788, and the Lehigh Coal Mining Company was the first anthracite coal company, sending out its maiden shipment in 1820. In the late 1880s, an influx of Southern and Eastern European immigrants supplied the mines with workers, and the area turned from farming to industry.

Local miner social groups in various coal regions joined to form the United Mine Workers of America, which called its first strike in 1890. The Anthracite Coal Strike of 1902, recognized as a milestone for American labor, lasted five months and ended only with the intervention of President Theodore Roosevelt, who called for arbitration. In 1959, the Susquehanna River permanently flooded the underground mines and put a final end to deep coal mining in the Wilkes-Barre area.

Entrepreneurs of the Industrial Age include J.C. Atkins, owner of the Wilkes-Barre Lace Manufacturing Co.; Fred Kirby, owner of five-and-dime stores; Charles Parrish and the Coxe brothers, owners of mines, timber companies and railroads; Charles Stegmaier, owner of the Brewery; Richard Jones, owner of the Vulcan Iron Works; and Frank Martz, who started Martz Trailways.



WEST SIDE OF THE PUBLIC SQUARE



Tropical Storm Agnes hit the area in 1972, dropping 18 inches of rain that pushed the Susquehanna River to a height of 40.9 feet, inundating 48 square miles of the Wyoming Valley. Six people were killed, and \$1 billion—\$6.3 billion in today’s dollars—of damage was caused, including homes and 2,278 Wilkes-Barre businesses. 72,000 people were evacuated from the area, and 150 factories, 3000 small businesses, and 5 shopping centers were flooded. Parts of Wilkes-Barre’s Downtown had no electricity for almost two weeks. In the seven years after Agnes, relief money went into public improvements such as restoring Public Square and Downtown’s business district.

The economic and physical condition of Downtown would be a very different today without the 1972 flood and the urban renewal project that resulted. Major land clearance and disposition projects were completed as a result of the efforts to revitalize Downtown. The construction of new office buildings (Blue Cross; Martz; ALLTEL), retail complexes (Midtown Village; Market Square Plaza); residential developments (Jefferson Lane Townhomes); hotels (Ramada and Genetti’s); institutional expansion (new police station); and parks (the rebuilding of Public Square) were

completed. A new traffic system was introduced, Downtown infrastructure was completely replaced, and the current canopy system was constructed to connect the three Downtown department stores into a ‘virtual mall’.

In a 1979 Redevelopment Authority report, written as the project was drawing to a close, the RA noted that the total cost of the Downtown Project was \$46,253,912. 198 properties were acquired, and 266 businesses, 67 families, and 381 individuals were relocated. Through the auspices of the RA, 143 buildings were demolished; 51 were rehabilitated. The total cost of new development in connection with the Downtown Project was \$25,852,200.

Other RA projects completed since the flood include Dyer Lane (total clearance resulting in the demolition of 32 buildings and the construction of the Wilkes-Barre Center complex), the Wright Street Project (aiding the expansion of Wilkes University), the King’s College Project (aiding the expansion of King’s College), the State Street Project (93 buildings demolished for the construction of projects like 10 East South Street, Bishop Hoban High School, Washington Square Apartments, and Marlboro Place), and the Industrial Park Project (involving the construction of Wilkes-Barre Boulevard and the redevelopment of the old railroad facilities to the east of the downtown core).

Additional Wilkes-Barre information of historic significance: Planters Peanuts started in Wilkes-Barre as a fruit and peanut stand owned by Amedeo Obici in 1906. A store owned by William C. Gildersleeve was an Underground Railroad station. HBO started in Wilkes-Barre. Wilkes-Barre’s famous include Ham Fisher, creator of the *Joe Palooka* comic strip; George Catlin, a mostly self-taught 19th-century artist who was the first important white artist to paint Native American tribes on the Great Plains; and C. Edgar Patience, an African-American known internationally for works carved out of coal—including King’s College Chapel of Christ the King’s Anthracite Altar—some of whose works are in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art.