

Preserving Historic Buildings in New Development

by Daniel Campbell, AIA, Historical Commissioner

On January 14, 1982, *West Chester Citizen*, a 20th century weekly newspaper, ran a 6-page article on development in Westtown Township. Then-current Supervisors A. Pierson Sill, Charles Scipione, and Milton Stokes are quoted as lamenting the “continuing growth in residential development” in the Township and as being committed to “maintaining a community that is a nice place to live.” Publications then and now often describe Westtown as a place of open space and farm land, yet having increasing growth in residential and commercial development.

The 1982 article states that “Developments containing approximately 723 homes have been approved. These include: Pleasant Grove, about 50 of 314 have been completed. Cuddeback, approved but on ‘hold.’ Westmount, 18 of 80 completed; and Plumly, roughly one-third of the approved 30 have been completed. Coventry Village on South Matlack Street is to contain 162 condominium units upon completion, about 30 are in.”

Supervisor Sill noted “There was a heavy development stage from 1977 to 1980 when construction was at a peak. Interest costs have now caused a slow-down, but we’re anticipating a pick-up.” So it’s obvious that for at least the past 40 years, the pressure of increased development has been felt on Westtown’s former farmlands.

John Snook, a Supervisor in East Bradford Township, is retired from the Brandywine Conservancy, and is now a land planning and preservation consultant. He has authored several local ordinances and reviewed many development plans in Chester and adjacent counties. John made a presentation for the Chester County Historic Preservation Network 2021 Spring Workshop called “Historic Places in Open Spaces.” You may have also heard his testimony at the Crebilly Farm hearings over the past few years.

Mr. Snook makes the following points. First, public consensus is needed for conservation – we have to want to do it. Ask people what they like about Chester County and why they moved here – a strong majority will say “for the history.” Next, an inventory of historic buildings, sites, and landscapes must be developed. The Westtown Historical Commission has done that in a list that counts every building or site, built 1900 or before. Soon the Historical Commission will be adding those built prior to 1920, i.e. structures over 100 years old. These are the “historic resources” that should be protected and remain visible to maintain the Township’s historic character, which the 1982 Supervisors had hoped to keep.

Then, land development ordinances are needed to review and approve development plans and mitigate the impacts that new development can have on historic resources. The Township Planning Commission serves this role in Westtown and the Historical Commission advises, regarding the listed buildings.

Mr. Snook is an advocate of placing new structures so as to minimize impacts to scenic roadside views and historical settings. An example of this technique is the Cherry Creek neighborhood in Thornbury Township, Delaware Co, on Dilworthtown Road near Rt. 202.



The Cherry Creek Barn was retained and renovated into 2 residences in a technique known as adaptive reuse

Although this is the most-dense development in Thornbury Township, the buildings are back from Dilworthtown Road, so that they can’t be seen when driving by. The front of the lot is left open and is wooded in a natural manner. The new residences are behind the wooded area, out of view. The retention of mature trees is an important mitigation technique that requires careful siting of the new buildings, which can also be incentivized into ordinances.



The Cherry Creek farmhouse was renovated and modernized, keeping the historic exterior and adding a compatibly designed garage at the rear

Furthermore, Mr. Snook observes that ordinances can create incentives for preserving historical resources. Many townships in Pennsylvania, including Westtown, offer “density bonuses” as an incentive to keep historic buildings on a site. For instance, in a new development design, a builder might be allowed an additional home site or two for each historic resource that they save and incorporate into their design. However, in many cases, it is important not to overcrowd a site with buildings, but rather to have a limited number of lots, with larger homes of greater value. Therefore, property values can be higher for the buyers of the new residences by maintaining open space, and historic resources, combined. You can see John Snook’s entire presentation on YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=HaJ8Nqh4P3A

In another example, a Victorian Period historic building on the crest of a hill, was retained and incorporated into the Metropolitan Townhomes on West Chester Pike in East Goshen. The historic building became the focal point of the new development.

As a last resort, in some cases an historic building can be moved to another part of the site, or off-site as a method of saving the architecture. For historical purposes, it is always best to keep a building “in-situ;” however, if and when the alternative will be demolition, it is preferable to move it. In a development on West Chester Pike at Manley Road, a small farmhouse was moved to the edge of the development and became office space, another adaptive reuse method, by relocation.



The circa 1880 Mansard style house at Metropolitan Townhomes was incorporated into the new development as office spaces, including the rental office

Through a combination of desire and will, and ordinances and incentives, the inventory of historic resources in our Township can be preserved. Thus, we will maintain the historic appearance and attraction of our community, for those who appreciate it and desire it.



The Manley House was moved and became offices. The development has some stone veneer to identify with the historic resource