

Speech upon acceptance of Chester County 2020 Lifetime Achievement Award –April 27,2017

Thank you to Karen Martynick for that generous introduction. Karen and I are both graduates of Interboro High School in Glenolden and have shared the experience of moving to and serving Chester County.

Thanks to the Board and Officers of CC2020, Jock Hannum, George Asimos and Judy DiFilippo -- and their executive director William Stevens. And I would like to acknowledge two prior recipients of this award with whom I have had the pleasure to work –George Fasic and Molly Morrison.

In 1994, Henry Jordan, the founder of Chester County 2020, Peter Hausmann, a commercial developer and Open Space advocate, and I were all serving on the Chester County Planning Commission. We were trying to develop a concept that would anchor the new comprehensive plan for the County. We decided that we needed a mission statement to assure that this new plan, Landscapes, had a clear defining purpose and would not be another plan for the library shelves.

On the blackboard that day we came up with:

To preserve and enhance the unique qualities of Chester County by concentrating growth in the most appropriate areas.

I have been a private entrepreneur --a for profit developer for all of my career. But I believe in the mission statement of Landscapes as it applies to my work at Arcadia Land Company, not just for the public sector.

I have been in development since 1976. Then, the business was principally subdividing farms on the edge of the metropolitan area. Most households wanted a single family medium to large lot and most jurisdictions were happy to comply. There was only a modest concern about traffic and environmental impact as long as the streets were wide the lots were large and the homes were of architecture with some historical reference.

The collective impact of this joint decision of the market and the governments at the time led us to what we now derisively call sprawl.

My work at Chester County planning and my travels around the country suggested there could be a better way. The New Urbanism movement showed that higher densities could bring a higher quality of life. A chance to walk to destinations – not only drive. Mixed use became a possibility.

We were just rediscovering the best of the past. All the places we love to visit on vacation are higher density than what we are currently permitted at home. The best old towns like West Chester were impossible to build under current zoning. What had we done to ourselves?

So Landscapes was Chester County's first attempt to preserve what made Chester County special – its history and beautiful landscapes – that word keeps coming up. And it proposed to do so by concentrating growth in the most appropriate areas. Advocating for what was a dirty word to many – density.

Now there is Landscapes 2 the steering committee of which was chaired by Judy DiFilippo and my son Jason. I noted that our mission from Landscapes is noted in the Commissioners' resolution adopting Landscapes 2.

Landscapes 3 is in the works. I still believe that the mission statement that we developed then is still appropriate and strong.

The market was changing. Fewer people were demanding large lots. More folks wanted to be close or in towns. Walkable communities were a new demand in the market.

And I decided to start a new company, Arcadia Land Company to specialize in the concepts articulated by Landscapes – to see where the new vision of concentrated growth – which became known as smart growth – could happen and could be profitable.

I learned quite quickly that the jurisdictions in Chester County and the other suburban Philadelphia counties had not zoned for this concentrated growth, although many community leaders believed in concept that this new way would allow for preservation and for better communities.

So we set about a new business approach – find sites that were appropriate for denser development because of existing infrastructure and surrounding uses – and then petition the jurisdiction for a rezoning.

Now re-zonings are difficult. They are a legislative action. The land owner has no right to force a jurisdiction to rezone. So our job is to develop the argument that demonstrates to all community stakeholders that everyone will be better off after the rezoning than if they stayed with the status quo. This is a long process.

In Chester County we chose sites determined by Sadsbury and Londonderry townships as their best location for a rural center. We proposed Traditional Neighbor Zoning with small lots 5000 sq. ft. about 1/8th of an acre. In Londonderry our community New Daleville was the subject of Witold Rybczynski's book Last Harvest. I cannot believe how often Witold travelled from Chestnut Hill to Southern Chester County to research the book and make it an accurate reflection of our land use approval process.

In other counties, we did not have the clarity of direction provided by township action resulting from the concepts in Landscapes, so we found sites that were appropriate and completed the rezoning process for another dozen sites.

One site exemplifies providing the growth concentration of Landscapes. We acquired a 2 acre used car lot in Media PA, walkable to regional rail and to the restaurants and shops of downtown Media. The local community considered the current use an undesirable one and working with the Borough Council and planning commission, we created a four story apartment project of 160 units. Our approval was by an 8-0 vote. We created a great place for people to live at a density (I am glad that you are sitting down) of 80 units per acre. This kind of density makes possible the land conservation that all of us support.

We at Arcadia have been a small contributor to the implementation of the ideas found in Landscapes.

However, the biggest and most important communities in Chester County and our region have not come from this methodical incremental approach.

Chesterbrook which is known locally and nationally as an ideal community with a high quality of life was the result of more than a decade of litigation.

Two decades later, The Village at Valley Forge is the home of the greatest mixed use walkable community in the region. It too, was the product of more than a decade of litigation.

I would hope in the future that our biggest and best new communities would not be the result of decades of lawyers work. Rather they should be the result of the public sector finding appropriate places for density as well as land conservation. The private sector will follow the lead of a bold public sector and work with existing communities to implement the spirit of Landscapes:

To preserve and enhance the unique qualities of Chester County by concentrating growth in the most appropriate areas.

I have had a wonderful and satisfying career. I'd like to thank my wife, Loretta for supporting me during the many nights I worked at Township meetings. I'd like to thank my team at Arcadia, particularly my son, Jason who now leads our firm.

Thanks to all of you in attendance – you are the best hope for progressive land use in Chester County. Please reach out to me if I can help you achieve your goals.