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## Branding a Borough – Creating a University Village

by Stephen Barth, Director of Economic Development Consultant

**N**ew Britain Borough is leading a transformative revitalization in its small municipality of 3,125. The Borough is home to Delaware Valley University, founded in 1895, an institution that just earned its university status this past year.

University status creates unique opportunities for New Britain Borough to grow that hadn't existed before. What began as a small farming school with only four students has grown into a campus of nearly 600 acres, with an enrollment of 2,100 students and 900 employees. Receiving university status allows the institution to offer graduate level doctoral degrees, expanding its enrollment and market in the global arena for its Life Sciences programs. As the University grows, so too can the Borough.

Since New Britain Borough has no downtown or traditional village, this has limited typical "Town & Gown" relationships that most university towns naturally have. Successful university towns improve and enhance the quality of life for students by providing expanded experiences to campus life such as coffee houses, restaurants, brew pubs, and other retail services next door to their campuses.

Delaware Valley University is New Britain Borough's greatest asset. Twenty-two percent of Borough residents (700 out of 3,125) are University students, a fixed demographic of 18-22

year olds in perpetuity. Conversely, 70% of the University's resident student population, 700 out of 1,000, are Borough residents.

Student discretionary spending is approximately \$2.6 million annually and the University's annual budget is \$58 million.

Borough Manager Sam Bryant said, "Delaware Valley University is a world class institution that gives us a unique draw compared to other municipalities. New Britain Borough is working to become a place people drive to, not drive through, and the development plan is a huge part of this effort."

New Britain Borough, a proactive municipality, has taken the initiative to help the University become more successful by creating a mixed-use, University Village Zoning Overlay District bordering all campus properties. This in turn helps the Borough by creating new economic opportunities and establishing a new identity for New Britain Borough as a "college town."

"Creating a University Village is good business for both the Borough and the University," remarked Stephen Barth consultant for economic development. "For the Borough, new development creates economic opportunities that generate municipal revenues, creates jobs and improves the community overall. The benefits to the University are many and include increased student

enrollment and retention, opportunities for student employment and internships, and a deeper sense of place."

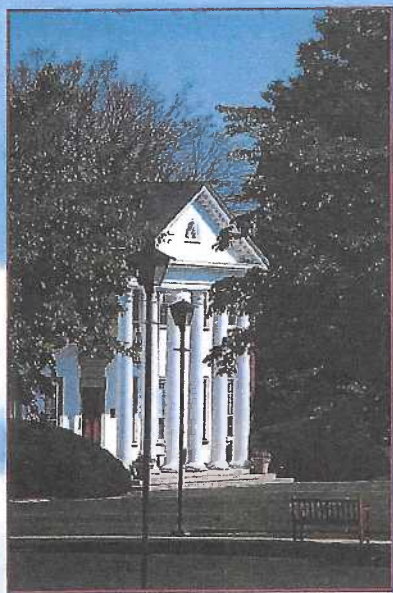
### Blighted Property as Catalyst of Change

Blighted properties aren't usually seen as a benefit to a community. However, for New Britain, a unique opportunity presented itself in the form of a blighted, 7-acre, empty factory building directly across from the University. The former commercial frame factory has been shuttered since the death of its owner in 2009.

A proposal for unwanted development of the blighted factory property prompted New Britain to realize it needed to create a clear vision for its future, to become more proactive in courting developers and those who would build what the community wanted. Those who would capitalize on the assets the Borough already had, namely the University.

The Borough started a number of initiatives to determine community needs and wants. Beyond just holding Town Hall meetings on the subject, in 2012, New Britain Borough created the Community and Business Committee (CBC) to help formalize and create a new vision for the community. The Committee is comprised of residents, council





**Photo credits:**  
**Stephen Barth**

**3-D Model (facing page):**  
**Gilmore Associates,**  
**New Britain, PA**



members, Borough staff and business owners. The CBC created surveys, held public meetings and formulated a concept vision for the Borough.

In 2014, the CBC applied for and received a \$100,000 DVRPC Economic Development Planning Grant to study the Butler Avenue corridor, the main artery through New Britain. The Bucks County Planning Commission has headed up the planning grant study. A steering committee was formed that includes residents, council officials, Borough staff, and community and business members.

New Britain also created a Joint Planning Collective that includes New Britain Borough, the University, Bucks County and neighboring Doylestown Township. The result of this has been the development of a new collaborative relationship amongst all parties. Many of the members of the Joint Planning Collective had never been on the University campus. One of the first meetings included a bus and walking tour led by the University President to showcase what an asset Delaware Valley University is for the community.

Traffic circumstances precipitated additional planning by the New Britain Borough Council. With the completion of a parkway bypass around the community, opened two years ago, local businesses faced the challenge

of reduced traffic count and customers. New Britain, for decades, had served as a major commuter corridor from Central Bucks County to Philadelphia and Montgomery County. While former Route 202 had long been perceived as a nuisance by residents, it was conversely a blessing for the many businesses along the corridor, now renamed Business Route 202 or Butler Avenue.

While initially inspired by the one single factory property, it quickly became apparent that the community should expand its field of view and look at the entire Business Route 202 corridor. With a new vision taking shape, one that envisioned creating a "University Village," the Borough began actively courting investors and developers.

Published in the local papers, the Borough's new plans and visions attracted developers anxious to explore development opportunities. A high-end developer was found who purchased the factory property and was enthusiastic to work closely with the Borough to build an exciting mixed-use, multi-story project.

The New Britain Borough's planning commission then began developing a Mixed-Use, University Village Zoning Overlay District to put zoning in place that would incentivize developers to build the projects that the community wanted. Working closely with the Bucks County Planning Commission, a

final version of the new ordinance is coming to Borough Council this month.

Development of the factory property will begin immediately, breaking ground this summer, and so a University Village is born. Mayor David Holewinski said, "New Britain Borough has been a well-kept secret for years, and now, through the efforts of many, will be made available to new businesses and residents to enjoy and prosper in. The walkability factor that was in the forefront of residents' minds is now either in the planning stages or in many cases in the construction stage. In the end, the ability to easily get from the west end of the Borough to the east end will serve the University, our residents and the business community in a positive manner."

Large-scale projects such as these are beneficial for all municipalities as ways of shaping their own futures, working collaboratively with other communities and agencies, and especially working with existing institutions to help promote and increase the quality of life for all residents.

