

Lancaster can do better

In preparation for convention center, 'report card' gives it a 'C'

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LANCASTER, Pa - If your kid came home with this report card, you might tell him he needs to improve.

Likewise, the report card prepared for downtown Lancaster indicates it's time to get the grades up.

Just 19 months before the proposed convention center and hotel on Penn Square are supposed to open officials wondered whether Lancaster was ready to be a "convention-center city." So the James Street Improvement District and the city itself took a close look at the downtown, "grading" it in 10 areas deemed to be essential to the success of a convention center.

The result, basically, is a "gentleman's C." In some areas — like entertainment — Lancaster does pretty well. In others, like streetscapes and retail, things are good but could be better. Public parks, signs to get drivers out of town, and other transportation issues definitely need some work.

"People shouldn't get hung up on the grades," said Lisa Riggs, executive director of the JSID, though she knows people will get hung up on the grades.

The point, she said, was to do an honest assessment — and then get to work. And the work already is commencing, as the JSID and the city share the assessment with community leaders, prioritize the items, and begin to tackle the issues.

All will benefit

"If you look at the things we're talking about, anyone will derive benefits from this," Riggs said. "This isn't being done just for the convention center."

But conventioners and especially the planners who book the shows and events need to see there's ample parking available, it's easy to get to and from the facility, there are plenty of restaurants, and the streets are clean and safe.

"Communities that have convention centers in the urban core are now required to have these amenities to meet the standards established by the visitor and meeting planners," reads a portion of the presentation created by Riggs and Randy Patterson of the city's Redevelopment Authority and **given to the Hourglass Foundation earlier this month.** "Otherwise, they will struggle to compete."

There are 10 "essential areas," or subjects on the report cards:

- Amenities refer mainly to entertainment options: Fulton Opera House, Central Market, Gallery Row, the city's historic architecture, and Clipper Magazine Stadium. These, officials say, are the downtown's current strength; they get an A-minus, though they need to be packaged better.
- Parking gets a B; existing facilities are "well distributed," and those on the drawing board — like the proposed Lancaster Newspapers garage at South Prince and Mifflin streets — will add to the inventory. But signs getting people to and from the garages are fair to poor, and officials need to figure out how much parking will be available in which garages for the convention center and hotel.
- Streetscapes get a B-minus; the look of downtown streets varies from block to block. There are some "street furniture" and lighting, but more are needed. The city has hired a consultant to study this "subject."
- Retail, which includes restaurants, also gets a B-minus. There's a good mix of merchandise and food, though Patterson noted that after 5 p.m., there are a mere 13 restaurants open in the city south of Lemon Street. That's not enough. There will be, according to the report, "proactive retail recruitment" and efforts to knit the downtown retail community together.
- "Clean and safe" also get a B-minus; downtown is statistically safe and generally clean, but "within even a quarter mile



radius of the convention center site, there are real and perceived safety issue[s]," according to the report. More surveillance cameras may help remedy that, as would additional lighting; other strategies can be developed on a block-by-block basis.

- The pedestrian environment rates a C. The flower baskets look nice and there are some signs, but it's inconsistent block to block. Facade-improvement programs might put a fresh coat of paint on things, and signs might better help direct pedestrians.
- Public spaces, or parks, also rate a C. Steinman Park and Binn's Park are models, but Penn Square is underutilized, and Lancaster Square is poor. Both are being studied in an attempt to figure out what to do next.
- "Vehicular orientation" rates a C; there are plenty of signs getting people from Route 30 into town, but signage directing people in town back out to Route 30 or other major roads is poor. The roads themselves could use some attention; one-way streets are confusing. Officials need to take a closer look before making any recommendations.
- The Visitors Center, now in Southern Market Center, gets a C. Southern Market simply may not be the best place for it.
- Finally, transportation and traffic get a D. Taxi service is limited; there's no experience with shuttle operations to get conventioners out of town or to the Amtrak station or airport. Heavy truck traffic on downtown streets is a problem. Officials are beginning to meet with transit-company officials.

The assessment, said Lancaster Mayor Rick Gray, was an attempt "to be realistic about what we have, our strengths and weaknesses."

But moreover, Riggs and Patterson said, it becomes a punch list. Things need to be prioritized. What's more important, flower baskets or signs getting travelers to Route 283?

Parking and transportation issues top the list, Riggs and Patterson said. "We need to be able to make commitments for parking now; that's basic logistics," Riggs said. "Between the parking authority and the newspaper [the proposed new garage] we have 4,000 spaces, but we need to work out the details on how many will be devoted to the center, and a system so people will know which garages are available, with how many spaces, and how to walk there."

Pedestrian issues also rank high. "After the conference, around 5 p.m., people are going to get out and walk," Riggs said, and they need to like what they see.

On the other hand, retail isn't quite as important. In any event, "We can't build retail that depends on the convention center," Patterson said. "It has to be built on the demographics of the community."

In the coming months Patterson, Riggs and others will be meeting with Rotary clubs and similar organizations to talk about the "report card" and what's being done to get the grades up; they want people to know "there's been a whole lot of work going on behind the scenes" and now it comes out center stage.

"Nobody really got started on this until the spring of this year because nobody knew if [the project] was really going to happen," Riggs said.

Patterson said, "I think we'll be well-positioned by March 2009, though I don't think anyone will tell you we'll get everything done.

"We won't have an A-plus by March 2009. But we can certainly be in the B's."

The Marriott Hotel in downtown is being developed by Penn Square Partners, a limited partnership, that consists of general partners Penn Square General Corp., a High Industries affiliate, and Penn Square Ltd. LLC, an affiliate of Lancaster Newspapers Inc., publisher of the Sunday News, Lancaster New Era and Intelligencer Journal.

