

Testimony Outline from Sean Watson for House Urban Affairs Committee June 3rd, 2021

Thank you for the opportunity to speak here. Thank you to all the State Representatives on the committee. Special thank you to Representative Del Rosso for the invitation as well.

My name is Sean Watson and I am a husband and father of 4, a business owner of sustain-able matter(s) which provides sustainable building materials to contractors across the state with my wife Nicole. I'm a landlord to 16 tenants and 1 lovely woman running a hair salon named Patty. I also am a co-owner of a new successful restaurant that we actually closed on the property on the 1st day of 2020 shutdown and we are running strong today.

I dove into the revitalization of New Kensington shortly after what I call a "successful loss" in a run for State Representative in 2016. It was successful for me because I grew as a person. I learned a lot from knocking on so many doors and speaking with so many people and was able to dial in on what I wanted to do moving forward.

I wanted to help become a catalyst for new growth in old run down towns that peaked in a previous era. I started with New Kensington.

This began by volunteering in the "better block" event by partnering with habitat for humanity to build a beer garden from pallets on a vacant lot to attract people to the town. It was a huge success and really started the ball rolling down the hill.

Please know that I'm not the big investor with cash to purchase and then knockout the whole project. I'm the little guy going in step by step with my own 2 hands and my not beautiful truck to rehab it.

So after a battle lost trying to buy 1 building I had under contract, I purchased a building by borrowing money at the corner of 5th & 7th with uninvited water features throughout. I literally had a guy come tell us (me and my investor) that we were crazy if we invested in this town.

What attracted me there aside from buying low and creating value through growth was in my opinion the natural draw of an old fashioned life. One where you show up on a main street and wave to your neighbors instead of posting to social media. Where personal interaction and beautiful historic buildings with character surround us.

My self and 2 other stakeholders are also under agreement with the New Kensington redevelopment authority to purchase the datolla theater to create a real anchor for the community.

We entered into agreement in Dec. '19 and after the changing of the director and covid, we still have not set a date yet. In the meantime we purchased a restaurant/bar and rehabbed the place and opened "botL" on the hill in New Ken on the arnold border. We are the first place to need reservations on a Friday or Saturday night in recent memory.

But ahead of purchasing properties we started to change the conversation from "what it used to be" and "I remember shopping as a kid down there" and of course the "it's just a shame on what it's become". These are said early and often about this town and others alike but over the last 5 years we have had less of these and replaced them with "have you heard about new business" or have you been down there lately to see what going on" The perception of positivity and opportunity for all is vital to this continued growth.

Some hurdles- Utility Companies for example

My property at 700 5th ave. has had electric run to it consistently for 30 years but not every meter. The ones turned off are now subject to being forced to be moved outside so they don't have to enter the building to read the meter. I get it but they use smart meters now and don't have to go in anyways. So asking me to move the all the meters outside will cost upwards of \$10,000. I may also have to pay to upgrade the transformer

so what do we get as a result? We get new paint and the deceptive facade of improvement which is not real improvement.

Lack of options.

I am also a consultant for eye-bot aerial solutions. He (Jake Lydick) would love to plant his feet in New Kensington but cannot find one option available that would suit his needs and they are not huge needs.

Possible solution- help owner operators get options at buildings ahead of developers like me. We want more stakeholders across the board. We have set up a New Kensington Downtown Partnership that will work together with anyone with or without a business trying to get involved and to be part of the solution.

How to unite new investment with our loyal and longterm residents and renters?

Idea's-

Parklets in missing teeth properties. Small area's that create sitting area's, relaxation spots with minimal investments.

Help connect those empty lots with a neighboring property to help create higher values for the existing homes. To create and to promote pride in the community is key and no feeling left behind is vital to that.

Parking- we need to plan for this town to be busy and packed with people. Assuming people will change their habits and walk farther than normal is counter intuitive to the growth of a town. Help create lots and funding for them please.

New Kensington Downtown Partnership

We did create a group so far built up from the founders of Knead Cafe, family services, voodoo, modfinish and myself to have an organization that can work cohesively together to create more together than alone. We have just started but we already donated camera's to the main strip and gave the police access to those as well as set up a clean up day a few weeks back that hugely successful.

In Closing-

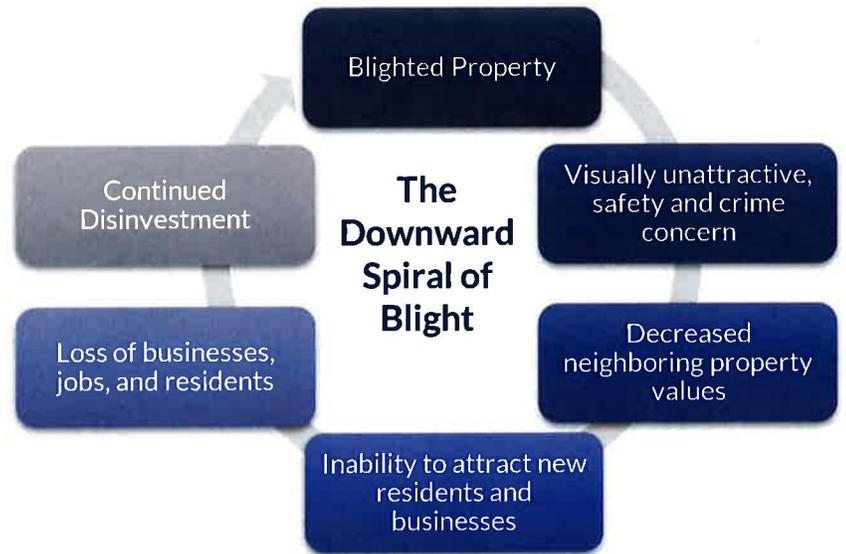
This area is the gold rush for smart and effective investment in infrastructure and properties alike. I would even say it feels like what the wild west may have felt like. Each day you hear of a new building being purchased or a business moving in. Then you meet that person and you meet them after they have all their chips in their position. My first question is "how can I help".

No other part of Pittsburgh has an opportunity like this. South Hills is packed, Cranberry lacks the character but these small mill towns have the buildings, the landscape, the lower home values, the access to major highways. They now have the attention of many and I promise you, they are the opportunity to take advantage of now.

The Economic Disadvantages and Opportunities Created by Blighted Properties

Blight – an Urban, Suburban and Rural Issue

Hundreds of thousands of blighted and abandoned buildings are spread across Pennsylvania, impeding community and economic development programs and conveying images of old, worn out communities. The economic cost of blighted properties is high, affecting residents, businesses, and all levels of government. Neglecting to remediate and remove blighted properties has long term economic consequences that can take decades to reverse.



Economic Benefits of Remediating Blight

The presence of blight can have significant negative economic impacts, but its remediation and redevelopment can have even greater positive economic impacts.

