

OPINION

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Scott S. Downs
Publisher

Paul Baker
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Sunday Editor

Yes to Preserve

The members of Cornwall Borough Council have the opportunity Monday to leave their mark on the future by voting to approve a zoning-amendment change necessary to build The Preserve at Historic Cornwall Village. We encourage them to do so.

The Preserve at Historic Cornwall Village is a visionary plan to reclaim the abandoned Cornwall open-pit mine and surrounding post-industrial wasteland and turn it into a residential and recreational wonderland. The centerpiece of the plan is an upscale hotel and waterpark overlooking the 75-acre lake that today fills the former open-pit quarry. Nearly 600 homes grouped into several residential villages would occupy other areas of the 570-acre property, although nearly half of it would remain undeveloped, open green space.

There are two ways to look at the Haines & Kibblehouse proposal, depending on whether you are the kind of person who sees the glass as half empty or the kind who sees it half full. Either way, you arrive at the same conclusion: Doing this project is better for Cornwall and the Lebanon Valley than not doing it.

Our Opinion

The glass-half-empty approach — referred to by the project planners as the “by-rights” view — is to look at what could happen with the property if the amendment is not approved and compare it to the planned development, and decide which is the lesser evil. By rights under the existing zoning ordinances, H&K could operate a rock crusher at the site to “harvest” the abundant leavings from the old ore mine, then build more than 450 single-family homes and up to 700,000 square feet of industrial space — likely a warehouse/distribution center. The fiscal impact, according to a study (commissioned and paid for by H&K) would be a net increase in revenue to the borough (tax-base increase less costs) of \$443,000 and a net loss to Cornwall-Lebanon School District of \$340,000. Also, all the traffic generated by the 450 homes and the industrial center would be dumped onto existing borough roads.

If The Preserve at Historic Cornwall Village were built as proposed, there would be no rock-crushing (except to provide for on-site construction needs) and no new industry at the end. There would be nearly 600 new homes, but at least 65 percent of them would be age-targeted to attract families with no school-age children. A new entrance to the site off Route 322 and two bypasses to keep traffic out of Minersville and Burd Coleman would minimize traffic impact on existing roads. Both the borough and the school district would come out ahead in net revenue — the former by \$1.6 million; the latter by \$189,000.

The glass-half-full approach looks at the assets the community would gain by the development. For Cornwall residents, these include access to the lake, trails and shops within the development. For the greater Lebanon Valley, they include jobs, population, quality housing without loss of farmland and a significant tourism draw.

Either way you look at it, it's a winner.

We have been impressed that the borough and H&K arrived at this point the right way, working together to ensure that the final plan is the best that it can be in the interests of present and future borough residents. A series of town meetings was held with residents of the Cornwall villages to explain the concept and seek input and ideas before the proposal was ever presented to Borough Council. An ad hoc committee was formed consisting of two representatives from Borough Council, two from the Planning Commission and one from a citizens' group, the Concerned Citizens of Cornwall. The committee met many times during a six-month period while crafting the zoning change that will be considered Monday night along with 48 conditions that could not be codified into law but to which H&K was asked to agree.

After reviewing the plan, Kris Troup, director of the Lebanon County Planning Department, wrote: “I would like to commend Cornwall Borough Officials and the Developer of the proposed Coordinated Mixed Use Overlay District for the work you have done to date on the project. ... The Developer and Cornwall Borough officials have endeavored to provide an efficient, transparent, inclusive process, which has encouraged public input at countless public meetings. This process should serve as a model to other developers and municipalities facing similar development pressures.”

We salute John Haines and Jack Kibblehouse for their vision as reflected in the plan for The Preserve at Historic Cornwall. It truly is a visionary outcome for the post-industrial moonscape that today surrounds the abandoned Cornwall Ore Mine.

We also echo Kris Troup's compliments of borough officials and citizens for the thorough and transparent manner in which they have conducted the deliberations that brought us to where we are today. Finally, we add our endorsement of the proposal itself. We urge Borough Council to vote yes on the proposed zoning overlay that would make possible The Preserve at Historic Cornwall.