



Haverford Township experiencing a civic reboot

The Oakmont business district, one of nine in Haverford Township that volunteers and government are reinvigorating. (ED HILLE / Staff Photographer)

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Ten years ago, Haverford Township was known for its political infighting, tired business areas, and status-quo Civic Council.

Then an election brought three new township commissioners; fresh blood energized the Civic Council - an umbrella group of local organizations - and grassroots volunteers got to work.

The impact is visible: new streetlights, improved sidewalks, better parking. The township boasts a popular music festival, a new recreation center and YMCA, and a diverse restaurant scene that includes Mexican, Thai, modern Irish, Italian, gastropubs, trendy breakfast spots, and earthy coffee houses.

"All these things send signals to consumers, businesses, and investors that this place is getting better," said Donald Kelly, vice president for the nonprofit Haverford Partnership for Economic Development. "We are excited about the direction our community is going."

It hasn't been easy. Haverford faces a unique challenge - nine separate business districts in a 10-square-mile township. "You can't just put your money in one place," said Commissioner Mario Oliva. "We are spread out all over."

About 48,000 people live in the inner-ring Delaware County suburb, flanked by Upper Darby and Radnor Township, sliced by West Chester Pike and bounded by, among other things, City Avenue and Darby Creek.



The township recently hired an economic development director, Graham Copeland, to help determine its needs. Copeland came to Haverford after four years working in a similar role in Old City. The first step, he said, is to evaluate which businesses are in town, see what would be a good fit, and then try to attract that type of establishment.

"This all requires partnerships," said Copeland. "Part of the task is to build a rapport with the property owners."

Copeland sees, as a result of the revitalization efforts, the surge of new restaurants within the township - about a third more than just five years ago, by one count - and the community support for them.

"Haverford goes over and beyond to support what the community wants and what businesses need to be successful," said Thomas Kane, 47, managing partner of Brick & Brew, a gastropub on Darby Road that opened in the fall of 2013.

Restaurateur Philip Ferro jumped at the chance to open the BYOB Edgewood Cafe in 2012 on Edgewood Road when the Pig & Whistle deli closed. After finding success there, he opened Vida Taqueria on Brookline Boulevard.

"Havertown has good working-class people that can support these BYOBs," Ferro said. "The community has been good to us."

The Haverford Dining Club, which has about 85 members, meets the first Wednesday of the month at a local restaurant chosen by vote at the beginning of the year. The menu and price - usually about \$35 - are fixed beforehand, and members vote on the dozen eateries they patronize. The Civic Council has generated more than \$46,000 to help spur projects in the community. Its primary fund-raiser is the Haverford Music Festival, which draws about 15,000 people to the Oakmont School building and a spot nearby on Darby Road.

The council also invites residents to submit ideas to work on over the year. If at least 10 people are willing to work on a project, it gets adopted by the council, Kelly said. The projects have included improvements to Oakmont business district, benches at the dog park, music lessons for autistic residents, and an after-prom party for Haverford High School.

"You do not have to wait for the government to say you can do things here," said Kelly. "You can do it with nonprofits."

A community project Oliva points to as a successful public-private partnership is Freedom Playground, an accessible park at Haverford Reserve built with \$350,000 in donations and \$50,000 from the township - and the efforts of about 2,000 volunteers.

One day last month, Ben Rodgers, 40, came to the playground with his children - ages 9, 7, and 4 - to play soccer. When they discovered all the nets were all in use, they headed for the maze of small playhouses, a climbing wall, outdoor musical instruments, tire swings, and slides, all set on a soft-cushioned floor.

"This place is great," Rodgers said.

He grew up in Haverford, but moved away for 15 years. He returned to raise a family, lured by the chance to be close to friends and relatives, amenities in the township, relatively low taxes, and the school district.

And, he said, "we know all our neighbors."