

# FINISHED BUSINESS

Some to-do lists can be easily forgotten — but not this one. Despite racking up achievements in significant quality-of-life categories, Pittsburgh still faces challenges on several fronts, even in areas that might have been considered in the “done” column. Heinz Endowments staff and regional leaders came up with 10 examples of issues that require additional attention. By Christine H. O’Toole

**P**ick a category. Any category. Give Pittsburgh a “best” or a “worst” ranking compared to other world cities and then share the news online. The city’s social media network will light up, keeping obsessive track of Pittsburgh’s place in the metropolitan pecking order. A salient characteristic of Pittsburghers: We’re equally adept at crowing and complaining.

For more than seven decades, The Heinz Endowments has worked alongside thousands of committed individuals and groups to tip the metro scales in a positive direction. The Pittsburgh region has made impressive strides in tackling challenges that have stymied other regions, such as reinventing a grimy Downtown as a residential neighborhood and arts destination, building the state’s first-ever structure for early childhood education, and bolstering public education in the city with a \$100 million college scholarship program. And the world has taken notice. (Cue the Twitter feeds.)

But, as ’70s teen idol Leif Garrett advises today’s social-media-saturated pop stars, “Don’t believe your own publicity.” Pittsburghers are understandably proud of the recognition and praise the region has received for its dynamic transformation, especially in the past 10 years. But while there is much to celebrate, there is also still much work to do.

Endowments President Grant Oliphant wants to keep the pressure on. “Let’s be careful about conflating progress with success and becoming apathetic as a result,” he recently wrote for the foundation’s blog.

The Endowments’ ongoing work, overlapping and intersecting across five program areas and making an impact across southwestern Pennsylvania, resembles a series of Venn diagrams — or, perhaps, a set of hula hoops in constant motion. As foundation staff and local leaders consider the changes that have occurred in the region over the past few decades, they acknowledge that whittling down a “to be continued” roster is a challenging exercise. The list of 10 they developed is not exhaustive but gives a sense of the significant issues that remain unresolved.

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## CHARTING THE PROGRESS FOR GREAT CITY SCHOOLS.

The good news: Pittsburgh Public Schools test scores, enrollment in Advanced Placement courses and graduation rates have been improving. The creation of the Pittsburgh Promise scholarship program in

2008 for eligible city graduates of public high schools has now helped more than 1,000 students advance to earn college degrees. But the district — still the largest concentration of students in the region — continues to contract, and school officials warn of looming financial troubles.

“The biggest challenge yet for public education is not unique to Pennsylvania and Pittsburgh,” says Ronald Cowell, president of Education Policy and Leadership Center, a statewide advocacy organization and Endowments grantee. “It’s for public education to demonstrate that it can effectively educate a high percentage of students where there is a great concentration of poverty.”

Because it has the region’s largest enrollment, the Pittsburgh school district has received the lion’s share of the Endowments’ attention. Education Program Director Stan Thompson says that will continue.

“We know that Pittsburgh public schools serve the majority of the city’s students,” he says. “Consequently, the Endowments won’t walk away. We have an obligation to support the district.”

Bill Isler, a long-time Pittsburgh school board member and former board president, confirms that dwindling enrollment and a looming funding crisis are fundamental problems. Superintendent Linda Lane is “whacking away” at both, he says. “We have a high cost per child. We must close and sell buildings, and get them off the tax rolls. There should be no tax to support empty buildings.”

But on issues of student readiness and performance, Isler sees clear goals ahead.

“We have to work hard on getting pre-K education,” he explains. “We now have support from the mayor on that. Our children should be reading by third grade, passing algebra in high school and, especially, graduating.”

Both Thompson and Isler foresee career education receiving increased emphasis in the near future. “The way the region is changing, the trades are needed and necessary,” says Isler. “We need to match our programs to careers.”

Teacher evaluations have been a minefield in school improvement. A \$40 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to the city schools has been held in limbo while the teachers’ union and the district argue about how to measure teacher effectiveness. One Endowments grantee, the advocacy group A+ Schools, has publicly urged the opponents to strike a deal.

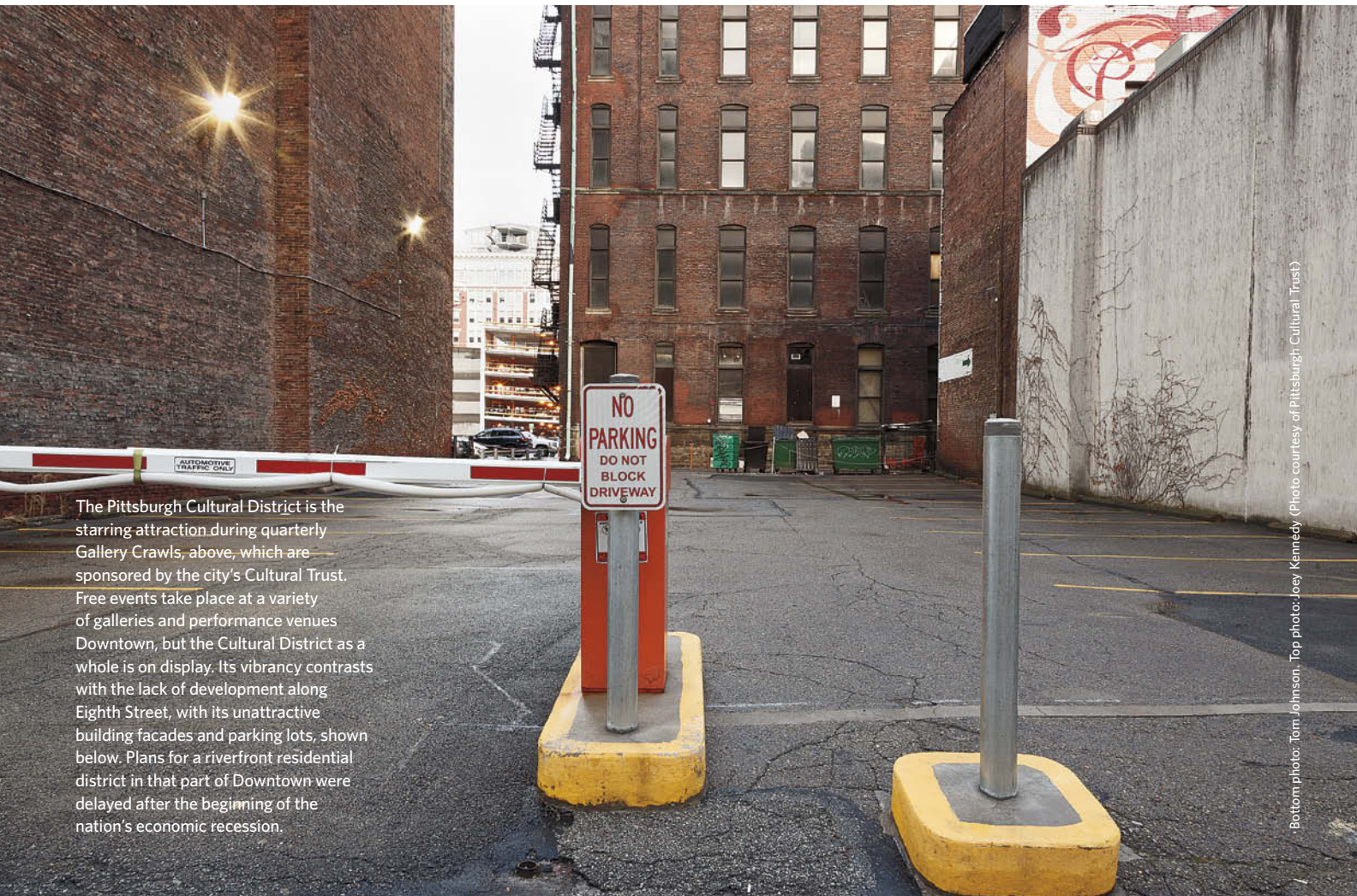
The loss of the massive grant “would be devastating for the school district,” Carey Harris, the organization’s president, said in a local television interview last year. “It would be devastating for the city, but most of all, it would be devastating for the kids.”







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The Pittsburgh Cultural District is the starring attraction during quarterly Gallery Crawls, above, which are sponsored by the city's Cultural Trust. Free events take place at a variety of galleries and performance venues Downtown, but the Cultural District as a whole is on display. Its vibrancy contrasts with the lack of development along Eighth Street, with its unattractive building facades and parking lots, shown below. Plans for a riverfront residential district in that part of Downtown were delayed after the beginning of the nation's economic recession.



## FINISH THE CULTURAL DISTRICT ...

Fleshed out with galleries, theaters, apartments, year-round festivals, a performing arts high school, and an explosion of upscale bars and cafes, Downtown Pittsburgh's Cultural District now attracts 2 million patrons a year. As the Cultural Trust celebrates its 30th anniversary, it has become a national example of how the arts can revitalize a faded urban center. But even the Trust's president readily admits that the 14-block neighborhood isn't complete.

"We have to open the doors wider and wider and wider," says Kevin McMahan. "We need to make sure we are diverse in all ways in the programming mix, so everyone feels there's something for them, at different price points, in and out of theaters. You're never done."

Diversity dominated public discussions on the bankruptcy and sale of Downtown's August Wilson Center for African American Culture last fall. Community and foundation leaders argued that the center could serve a need unmet elsewhere in the Cultural District: the celebration of African American culture in a city still largely segregated by race. A coalition that included the Endowments, the Pittsburgh and Richard King Mellon foundations, the Urban Redevelopment Authority, and city and county officials fended off a bid to turn the center into a hotel, allowing the foundations to purchase the building and preserve its mission. Now, plans include a role for the Trust to help operate the building while an African American-led entity is created to design high-quality, community-responsive programming.

Five years ago, as the region and nation plunged into recession, the Trust put its most ambitious project on hold. RiverParc, envisioned as a \$460 million residential, retail and entertainment development in the Cultural District, has an unrealized future. Its proposed location remains an assemblage of parking lots and shabby sliver buildings. A protracted legal battle with the developer should be resolved this year, and McMahan says that a new neighborhood, similar to the past plan, may still arise.

"But the Downtown housing market is robust now," says McMahan. "We'll look at what the market and city tell us about highest and best use."

As creative arts initiatives in Pittsburgh neighborhoods grow in number, they are attracting the attention of local philanthropies and helping to build a regional arts infrastructure that includes programs in struggling communities. One example is the YMCA Westinghouse Lighthouse Project in Homewood, which uses media arts such as music production, graphic design, film and photography to teach youth about leadership and career readiness.

## ... AND INVEST IN CULTURAL DEVELOPMENT.

The Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council recently published a report showing that the region comes in last in the number of organizations founded after the year 2000. That ranking is despite the fact that total arts spending in Pittsburgh is among the highest in its peer group, and the city continues to attract more artists, on a per capita basis, than other comparable cities do.

"So many of us are old organizations," says Karla Boos, who founded Quantum Theatre 25 years ago. "There aren't that many new. But we can't just say that the climate is not nurturing new organizations. It also suggests that there are new groups that are conceiving themselves in other ways."

If new arts talent is infiltrating neighborhoods far from the klieg lights of the Cultural District, fans and funders must follow.

The shift from generous support for a few high-profile groups to sustaining a broader arts community has occurred gradually over the past decades. Janet Sarbaugh, who steers the Endowments' Arts & Culture Program, expects that large and small donors will need to step up to new projects. Among those she hopes the community will support: more small and mid-sized arts organizations; high-quality arts education in and out of school; live-and-work spaces for artists; performance opportunities at smaller neighborhood venues, such as the New Hazlett Theater on Pittsburgh's North Side and the Kelly Strayhorn Theater in East Liberty; and professional development programs such as Flight School, a boot camp for rising artists.

While foundations have been major benefactors to Pittsburgh's arts groups, providing 18 percent of recent revenues, individual contributions have lagged. Donors nationwide provide nearly a quarter of arts groups' budgets. By contrast, according to the Arts Council's Cultural Data Project, individuals in the Pittsburgh region give far less — only 4.4 percent. Designated Days of Giving, which include matching funds from philanthropies, are encouraging private gifts, and online crowd-sourcing is boosting new projects.

Building support for the arts also includes arts education. While the vast majority of adults in the region believe that the arts are integral to K-12 education, many schools have reduced or eliminated quality programs. In addition, out-of-school programs remain very important but do not have enough resources. The Endowments and the Grable Foundation have worked with the Pittsburgh Public Schools to build a division of arts education, and they continue a commitment to increasing the quality and equitable provision of arts education in the district.

Creating an arts infrastructure that serves distressed communities is the goal of two projects supported by the Endowments. The Lighthouse Project, an after-school program operated by the Homewood-Brushton YMCA and Pittsburgh Westinghouse Academy 6-12, offers multimedia instruction, mentoring and academic support. The foundation's Transformative Arts initiative is currently focused on developing a strategy with a community advisory board. This group will plan the use of Endowments funding to strengthen out-of-school-time work in and through the arts in African American and low-income communities in Allegheny County.





## CLEAN THE AIR. NOW.

Pittsburgh has shed the “hell with the lid off” image it had before the mid-1950s. But clearer skies don’t mean clean and healthy air.

Despite significant progress in recent decades, air quality in the region still remains among the worst in the nation, and it isn’t improving as quickly as in other urban areas. For example, as fine particulate matter kills 130,000 Americans each year, Pittsburgh ranks among the worst 13 percent of U.S. cities for average annual levels of fine particle pollution. The cancer risk from air toxics in Allegheny County is in the top 2 percent in the nation.

Exposure to modern-day levels of air pollution in southwestern Pennsylvania has been linked to asthma, heart and lung disease, cancer, autism, adverse birth outcomes and even premature death. Poor air quality has contributed to an asthma epidemic in Pittsburgh and affects the ability of schoolchildren to perform well. It has harmful effects on the health of the workforce, leading to increased medical costs and loss of productivity. It also hinders corporate recruitment efforts and drives away economic growth industries of the future.

Raising public awareness about these air-quality issues is another challenge due to the widely held misperception that the problem dissipated along with the heavy smoke of the last century. At a Pittsburgh City Council hearing last year, one local resident argued that Pittsburghers can — and should — expect and demand more when it comes to the air they breathe.

“Better is not good,” a frustrated Jody Handley told council members. “It’s not even ‘just not good enough’ — where we are right now, it is not good.”

Philip Johnson, the Endowments’ Environment Program interim director, agrees. “If we want to be known as a truly livable city, we have to contend with our major air pollution problem,” he says. “We also have to take responsibility for the significant fraction of air pollution created by sources in our region.”

Scientists at the Clean Air Task Force estimate that one-half to two-thirds of the harmful pollutants in Pittsburgh are generated in Pennsylvania, not by coal-fired power plants upwind in other states. That’s bad news because the region is producing a lot of air pollution, but it’s good news because it means individuals, organizations and businesses hold the power to make a change.

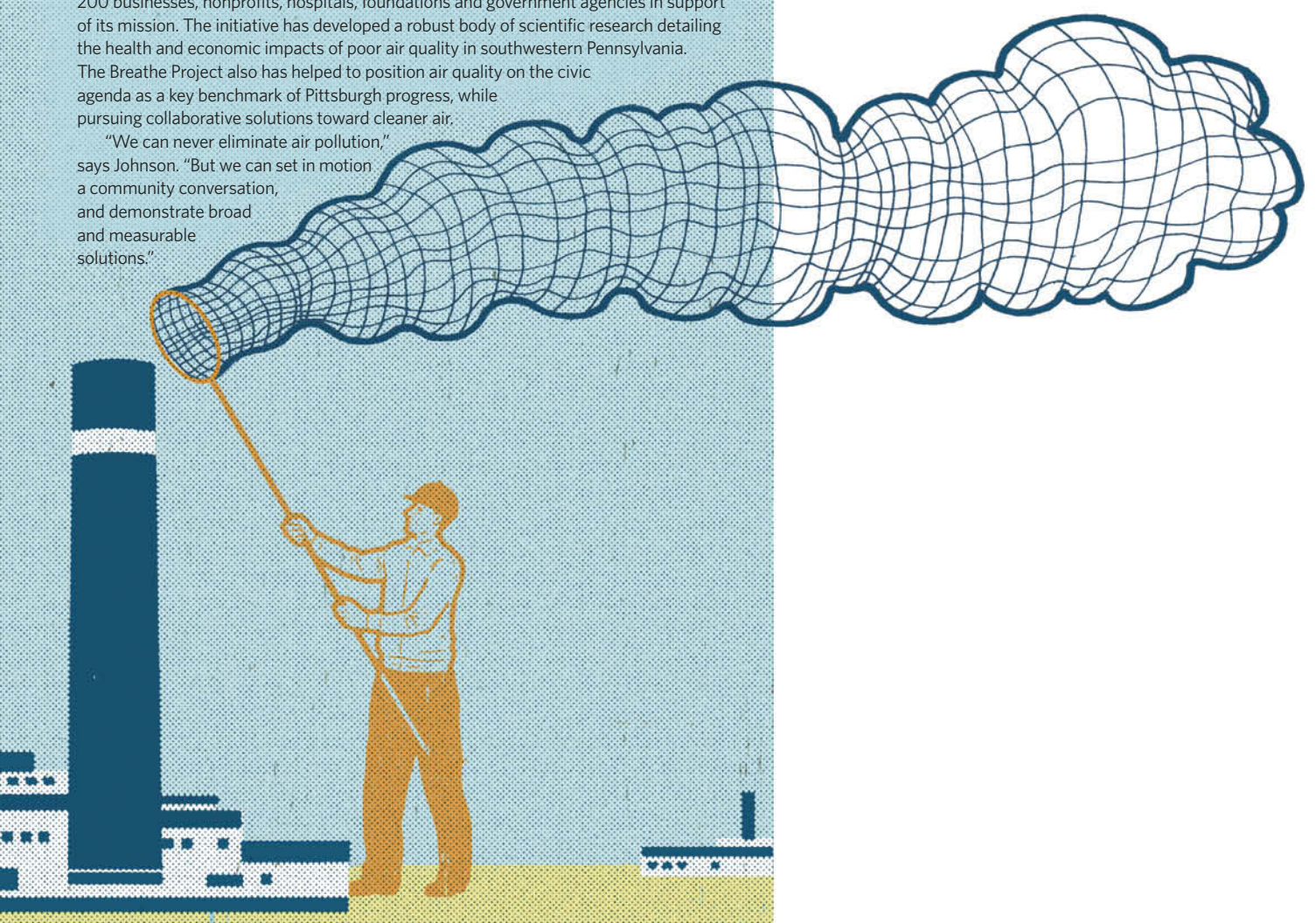
One example is the Breathe Project, which the Endowments launched in 2011 to help improve the region’s air quality. The Breathe Project coalition has grown to include nearly 200 businesses, nonprofits, hospitals, foundations and government agencies in support of its mission. The initiative has developed a robust body of scientific research detailing the health and economic impacts of poor air quality in southwestern Pennsylvania.

The Breathe Project also has helped to position air quality on the civic agenda as a key benchmark of Pittsburgh progress, while pursuing collaborative solutions toward cleaner air.

“We can never eliminate air pollution,” says Johnson. “But we can set in motion a community conversation, and demonstrate broad and measurable solutions.”

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**Philip Johnson**, interim director,  
Heinz Endowments Environment Program





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## DITTO FOR WATER.

When it rains even a tenth of an inch, filthy water discharges into local rivers. The combination of befouled overflow and malfunctioning septic systems has resulted in Pittsburgh's sewage overflow problem being among the most troublesome in the country. Pennsylvania is the worst offender for combined sewage overflows in the United States.

Besides the problems created by stormwater run-off, Pittsburgh's rivers face persistent challenges from other significant sources of pollution, including local industry and waste from upstream coal-fired power plants and fracking processes.

Facing a consent decree from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 2012, the region finally submitted a plan to revamp its stormwater and combined sewage overflows. One problem: The estimated cost of more than \$2 billion to construct holding tanks and pipes would be borne by ratepayers. Another concern was that the plan didn't eliminate all overflows. It merely contained 79 percent of them.

Groups like Nine Mile Run Watershed Association, 3 Rivers Wet Weather and others are collaborating through the Clean Rivers Campaign to test projects to divert stormwater before it reaches the sewers. This year, the group will begin a million-dollar project in Pittsburgh's Homewood neighborhood. Its long-term goal is to reduce the 25 million gallons of sewage flowing into Nine Mile Run each year by 25 percent. Solutions at three sites include bioswales, rain gardens, tree planting and residential rain barrels.

Brenda Smith, executive director of the Nine Mile Run group, says the work adds value beyond just meeting federal standards. "If you're going to spend money, why not get as many benefits as you can?" she asks. "For the money we're spending, [by using green infrastructure] we could get cleaner air, cooler temps and revitalized business districts."

Other cities have outpaced Pittsburgh in employing clean water strategies. New York has already saved \$1.5 billion by creating hundreds of green infrastructure installations. Pittsburgh's handful of test projects lag in comparison.

Meanwhile, when it rains, stormwater still pours.



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GET THERE FROM  
HERE, SUSTAINABLY.

Good transportation systems can ease congestion and pollution. In developing its East Busway, Pittsburgh created an efficient system for moving people from Downtown to some neighborhoods. Rob Stephany, the Endowments' program director for Community & Economic Development, calls the busway a "Main Street" but observes that Main Streets often separate wealth from poverty.

Transit-oriented community development, wildly successful in 21st-century Denver, is now being adapted around the East Liberty Busway portal to jump-start growth in adjacent neighborhoods. In two years, Stephany predicts, riders will exit the busway not merely to walk home, but to visit a crop of new businesses and services.

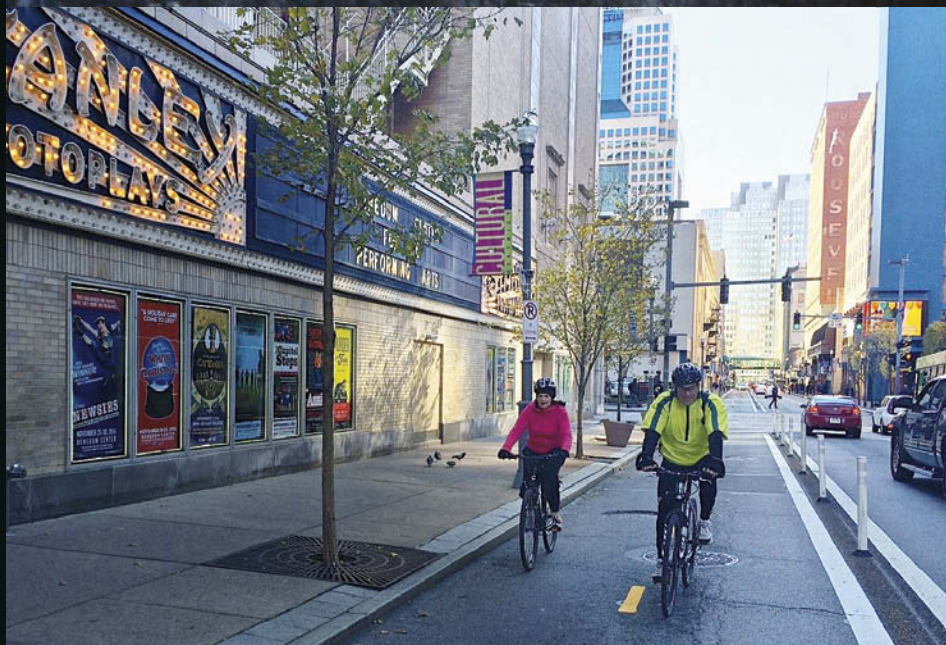
"There's great potential," he says. "The current land uses aren't the highest possible. Ridership is huge, so it's clearly an important connector, but not yet a neighborhood amenity."

Stephany argues that transportation solutions done well support economic development, and he notes other neighborhoods ill-served by public transit that are overdue for solutions.

"Spatial juxtaposition is a huge opportunity. We have Google in Larimer. Hazelwood is now a riverfront neighborhood," he observes, citing communities that could benefit from transit changes. "The new city leadership is talking about transportation, be it a rail circulator or rapid bus transit. It's expensive, so the philanthropic role is visioning and planning."

Pennsylvania's aging roads, highways and mass transit systems have all received D's on a recent infrastructure report card from the American Society of Engineers. Stephany adds that, locally, old suburban vectors need a revamp. For example, he described Route 51, running south from Pittsburgh, as a "corridor of blight" with the parallel roadway, busway and railway causing headaches for motorists and pedestrians.

With support from the Endowments, a Carnegie Mellon University team is imagining a 21st-century redesign of the thoroughfare.



Rush-hour traffic jams, such as the slow morning commute into Downtown Pittsburgh, are daily reminders of the need to reconsider the region's transportation systems.

Bicycle lanes, like the one above on Penn Avenue that runs through Downtown, have been one response, but broader efforts also are being examined.

## CONNECT MORE COMMUNITIES TO RIVERS.

Concerted planning for the development of public property in Pittsburgh has resulted in renovations of Point State Park and the David L. Lawrence Convention Center Downtown, the North Shore and sections of the South Side. Included in the improvements have been efforts to create visitor-friendly linkages between these locations and their adjacent rivers. But harmonious civic design involves more than riverfront paths.

While cities like Houston and Philadelphia speed ahead with civic projects that combine water access and innovative green infrastructure, Pittsburgh remains in the planning stages on several important expansions of waterfront projects.

Existing plans call for extending shoreline connections, notably along the Allegheny Riverfront Green Boulevard, a still-developing stretch of trails, commuter rail lines, environmental landscaping and other riverfront projects. These improvements would continue through the city's Strip District and to the West End via pedestrian paths on the West End Bridge. The latter project will create the first-ever walking connection between North Side and West End neighborhoods, and has been on the books since 2006, with a cost now estimated at \$12 million.

Lisa Schroeder, former president of Riverlife, a public-private nonprofit tasked with creating a blueprint for reinventing the city's riverfronts, calls the gaps "under-activated" sections of the shorelines and says designs are ready to move forward.

"For the West End pedestrian bridge, there is a beautiful, efficient design that was selected through an international competition," says Schroeder, who recently left Riverlife to head a foundation in Baltimore. "Fast forward to today, and there's even more activity along the banks of the Ohio River to which the proposed pedestrian bridge will connect. Rivers Casino now occupies the northern bank, and the southern bank is busy as a very active barge staging and river operations area."

The pedestrian bridge project has not moved forward due to the challenges of coordinating with a south shore rail freight line and the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation's long-term construction plans. But that doesn't mean the ideas for improvements have stopped.

Next on the to-do list: riverfront neighborhood connections in Lawrenceville and a new 160-slip marina for the South Side.

## REVITALIZE MORE NEIGHBORHOODS AND USE RENEWABLES.

Rebuilding older, neglected neighborhoods can't be accomplished with new storefronts alone. A comprehensive attempt to make communities sustainable cleans the air, conserves water and generates investment. Research on energy-efficient solutions at regional universities and companies can benefit local efforts to rejuvenate neighborhoods. Connecting residents to new job opportunities that result from the research can make communities even more stable for the long term.

"There's been lots of [local] effort on the energy-efficiency side," says Mike Schiller, president of the Green Building Alliance. The alliance has found "tremendous uptake" on its Pittsburgh 2030 projects, for which commercial building owners commit to 50 percent reductions in energy, water and carbon emissions in the next 15 years. "More occupants of buildings are starting to care."

Local entrepreneurs are inventing solutions using wind turbines, batteries and solar power. "It's finally ramping up," Schiller says. "If growth continues, in another 10 years, a whole lot of renewable energy will be deployed."

Neighborhoods can benefit economically from industries tied to sustainability as the region's workplaces evolve. "The most important piece of the workforce puzzle is to connect residents to the new economy, not just construction jobs," the Endowments' Rob Stephany says.

Testing that theory will be two major development tracts in the city: the Pittsburgh Penguins' mixed-use project, slated for the former Downtown location of the hockey team's arena, and the Almono riverfront property, once the site of a Hazelwood coke works, that's now owned by the Endowments and three other foundations.



Seaski Associates, Inc.

Some efforts to protect and complement Pittsburgh's environment have come to fruition while others are still on the drawing board. Above, plans are underway to create the walkable, rail-with-trail Allegheny Riverfront Green Boulevard that accommodates existing railway use, incorporates additional transportation infrastructure and stormwater management, and improves riverfront habitat and connections to neighboring communities.



East End Cooperative Ministry's new \$15 million Community House was built to LEED — Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design — Platinum standards, which involved incorporating a "green" roof that included a garden and terrace.





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Sean Means, 32, was in the first class of Heinz Fellows, a two-year program that embeds a group of African American men — all college graduates on professional career paths — in Pittsburgh public schools as mentors. The initiative also supports the Fellows' pursuit of advanced degrees, preferably in education-related fields. After completing the program, Means became a full-time teacher at Pittsburgh Westinghouse 6-12.

Justin Vismesky

## FACE UP TO RACE.

Inequality underlies most challenges to the region's future agenda. Social justice — which can be defined as economic opportunity, outstanding neighborhood schools, diversity or civil rights — continues to elude many Pittsburghers.

"Race is often the unspoken that has significant consequences," says Carmen Anderson, a senior Children, Youth & Families program officer at the Endowments. "It's on the 'undone' list. How do we consider race in terms of equity as it relates to community, industry, health, etc.? It affects grantmaking, for sure."

The Endowments is prodding the discussion with its African American Men and Boys Initiative, which focuses on improving life outcomes for black males in the Pittsburgh region and includes support to examine and expand media portrayals of African American men and youth. The Transformative Arts Project, youth mentoring and organizing programs, and various community development efforts also offer opportunities to address various forms of inequality and their impact.



## INVEST MORE IN EARLY EDUCATION.

For the past 20 years, researchers have spread the word to anyone who'll listen: Education for children ages birth to five gives them skills that sustain them the rest of their lives. The Endowments supported some of the earliest local pilot projects through its Early Childhood Initiative beginning in 1994 and, in the past two years alone, has awarded \$9 million to fund programs in the Pittsburgh region and across the state.

The state's funding contribution to early education has grown since legislation passed in 2008. Meanwhile, corporations have supported early childhood initiatives, based on the research-based approaches championed by the Endowments and anchored in hard evidence: For every \$1 invested in early childhood education, \$7 is saved on remedial programs later.

While all this is good news, it is not enough. State funding has not been sufficiently increased to support the large numbers of children across Pennsylvania who need access to high-quality pre-K programs. In Allegheny County, 65 percent of young children — some 16,000 three- and four-year-olds — are unable to attend such programs.

"We still don't have enough slots," says Michelle Figlar, executive director of the Pittsburgh Association for the Education of Young Children. "We finally have a state-funded program, but it serves only one in six eligible Pennsylvania children. The city and county can't do this on their own. Lawmakers at the national and state levels really need to make this a priority. Every child, regardless of where they live, has the right to high-quality pre-K programs. They're only birth to five once — they don't get a second chance."

At a White House press conference in December, the Endowments was among the philanthropies pledging renewed support for parental education, home visiting, Early Head Start, quality child care, Head Start and preschool programs. The foundation will spend \$9 million on those efforts locally in the next few years.

"We have to close the gap and finish what we began two decades ago," says Marge Petruska, the Endowments' senior program director for Children, Youth & Families, agreeing that limited access to quality pre-K remains a concern. "We know without a doubt that these programs benefit children, parents and society."

Research has shown that high-quality early childhood education makes a difference in the lives of young children. Among the Pittsburgh sites that offer creative programs integrating hands-on play and learning is the Pittsburgh Children's Museum, which has two pre-kindergarten/Head Start classes for children ages 3-5 that are provided through a partnership with the Pittsburgh Public Schools.

