

AS A FORMER MANUFACTURING HUB, MILLVALE BOROUGH HAS BIG DREAMS FOR EVOLVING INTO A SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY WITH FOOD-BASED ATTRACTIONS. IT ALSO HAS ENOUGH LOCAL ENTHUSIASM AND EAGER OUTSIDE SUPPORT TO MAKE THE TRANSFORMATION POSSIBLE. BY ELEANOR CHUTE

ECOCENTRIC MILLVALE

Picture this: A town once known for lumber and iron factories refashions itself into a self-reliant community, complete with solar-powered buildings and locally grown food to supply its own foodie niche northeast of Downtown Pittsburgh.

That's the vision for Millvale, a small borough along the Allegheny River with a can-do attitude.

The former mill town is in the midst of "eco-district" planning, a community-wide effort aimed at ensuring the borough's long-term viability through sustainable development. Ideas range from the imminent, such as the creation of a food hub that is scheduled to open in coming months, to the long-range, such as proposals to address air quality issues.

The plan's first three goals are summarized in these aspirational statements: "Millvale is a self-reliant urban solar village." "Millvale is a foodie paradise for everyone and is known for hyper-local production." "Millvale is part of a just watershed system known for productive and pleasurable landscapes." Additional goals were added earlier this year around air, mobility and equity.

"These are really compelling ideas," said Rob Stephany, Community & Economic Development program director for The Heinz Endowments, a supporter of the revitalization work.

Founded in 1868, Millvale covers less than one square mile, most on the northern side of Route 28, while across the highway is the Millvale Riverfront Park, which is a 20-minute bike ride from Downtown Pittsburgh. Like many communities in the region, the borough had been a bustling town

with its own manufacturing base as well as connections to southwestern Pennsylvania's thriving steel industry. But as the steel production declined over the years, so did Millvale's population. The 2010 Census counted 3,744, about 1,000 less than in 1980.

Millvale also has endured major flooding. Some of the best-known images of the borough are of water roaring down main streets from Girty's Run creek during Hurricane Ivan in 2004, engulfing businesses and homes and leaving behind mounds of debris and destruction.

But the community didn't give up after that flood or after a smaller one in 2007. Instead, Millvale supporters have used the same spirit that helped them pull together in the face of devastation to work toward becoming a sustainable community attractive to residents and businesses.

"If people can come together to respond to the flooding, can we come together for a proactive purpose? The answer we believe is yes," said Brian Wolovich, a community activist who was a leader in establishing a local library and now is a borough councilman.

Revitalization initiatives in the borough are being developed with help from evolveEA, a sustainable



The future Millvale "food hub," where fresh and affordable food can be sold in the heart of town, is still an incomplete frame with a central view of the borough. But progress in its development will be key to progress in Millvale's goal to become a sustainable community.



architecture and consulting firm. The first Millvale ecodistrict plan was developed in 2012. An updated “2.0” version was completed in April.

A key early project was Millvale Community Library, which opened in 2013 and is a center of activity. The storefront building has rooftop solar panels and gardens in the back, serving as a model for how the community can become sustainable.

The idea of a library wasn’t easy to sell to some inside and outside the borough. But Gregg Behr, executive director of The Grable Foundation, suggested that supporters begin small, gain experience and demonstrate community interest. So, instead of starting with a library building, the group established a summer reading program in 2008 with a grant of \$9,250, the first and smallest of five Grable grants.

Since then, 20 to 25 funders have signed on to some part of the community’s vision, said Mr. Wolovich. The Endowments, for example, has helped to pay for installing solar panels atop the library, building a greenhouse, and securing strategic property to develop a food hub–based town square. The foundation also has funded efforts to start an incubator for food entrepreneurs, improve bicycle safety, and create a public art piece out of the word “imagine” that has been installed near the library. In addition, Millvale participates in the Endowments-supported Solar Up PA campaign to increase solar installations in Allegheny County as a way of decreasing demand for polluting, fossil-fuel energy.

“In the big scheme, small investments have yielded huge results,” said Mr. Stephany. “There’s something humbling about that.”

The library’s success has helped to make other projects possible, said Tina Walker, a longtime resident and president of the Millvale Community Development Corporation (MCDC). “It was a catalyst in getting people united to rally around the community.”

MCDC, the borough and others are collaborating in the development of the Town Square Project, which is located at a formerly flood-damaged site in the center of town where the food hub will be placed.

“I think food is a way to build community,” said Zaheen Hussain, Millvale’s sustainability coordinator. Hussain was hired last year with a grant to the library from Neighborhood Allies, a grantmaking nonprofit that supports development in economically struggling neighborhoods. “We saw [the food hub] as a huge opportunity to start building momentum,” he explained, “both to be a space for residents to gather as well as to bring in more energy from surrounding communities into our town.”



WELCOME TO MILLVALE

MR. SMALLS FUNHOUSE
CONCERT VENUE,
RECORDING STUDIO,
ART GALLERY,
SKATE PARK, BAR
AND RESTAURANT –
GOOD NAME

ATTIC RECORD STORE
HARD-TO-FIND
MUSIC COLLECTIONS
MAKE THIS PLACE
A TREASURE

**MILLVALE
COMMUNITY LIBRARY**
A MODEL OF THE
BOROUGH’S
ECOLOGICAL,
ECONOMIC AND
SOCIAL GOALS

**JEAN-MARC CHATELLIER’S
FRENCH BAKERY**
TONS OF CALORIES
AND WORTH
EVERY SINGLE
ONE OF THEM

GRIST HOUSE BREWING
LOCAL LAGER AT
ITS FINEST

**ST. NICHOLAS CROATIAN
CATHOLIC CHURCH**
EXQUISITELY
PAINTED MURALS,
IMPORTANT
TO PRESERVE

The food hub will have first-floor retail space for fresh produce and a cafe. Upstairs, the nonprofit New Sun Rising will have offices and offer incubator services for food entrepreneurs. Another piece of the food initiative is the Gardens of Millvale, which include vacant lots in the heart of the borough that were turned into gardening plots for community use.

Yet, water issues are still a critical challenge for Millvale. Due to its location at the end of the Girty’s Run watershed, it receives runoff from communities upstream. Dredging by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has helped, and the borough monitors the condition of the creek. Because part of the community is in a flood plain, the borough has a new ordinance setting construction standards as required by the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Millvale can’t solve water problems on its own, however. Its ecodistrict plan suggests establishing a Girty’s Run watershed association. But the borough has taken steps to control what it can.

With state funding, the Western Pennsylvania Conservancy built two bioswales at Mount Alvernia, the 18-acre campus of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities. The larger one drains an 11-acre area and has reduced runoff there by 89 percent, said Jeff Bergman, the conservancy’s director of community forestry and director of TreeVitalize Pittsburgh. The conservancy also was involved in planting about 500 trees in the borough, which absorb water in their roots.

“I have to give them credit for understanding the stormwater issues we have and being a leader among municipalities, implementing green infrastructure and looking for creative ways to solve their problems,” said Mr. Bergman.

For decades, many people have traveled through Millvale to suburbs farther north or visited primarily to tour the Maxo Vanka murals at St. Nicholas Croatian Catholic Church or to buy chocolates, croissants, pancakes and other local specialties. Now the community is experiencing some residential overflow from the nearby, trendy Lawrenceville neighborhood in Pittsburgh where rents are higher than in Millvale.

While planners welcome new businesses and residents, the community also wants to preserve Millvale’s small-town feel and affordability.

“Millvale is an incredible place, and it’s going incredible places,” said Christine Mondor, principal for evolveEA. “So stay tuned.” **h**



Scott Goldsmith

SOLAR VILLAGE

Part of Millvale's ecodistrict planning includes expanding solar installations in the borough as part of its involvement with the Endowments-supported Solar Up PA campaign. Solar panels have already been installed on the roof of Millvale Community Library, allowing it to generate more electricity than it uses.



PRODUCTIVE LANDSCAPES

Millvale is working to change its image as a flood-ravaged community to being known for having the ability to integrate water into ecologically rich water parks. Completed projects include a rain garden at the local library and bioswales at the Mount Alvernia campus of the Sisters of St. Francis of the Neumann Communities.

MILLVALE'S ECOCENTRIC ATTITUDE

FOODIE PARADISE

Building on its local food specialties such as pancakes and chocolates, Millvale is expecting its food hub to make fresh and healthy food more available to residents and to be an integral factor in improving the local economy.

