

Report from the Field

History Keeps Bethlehem Steel from Going off the Rails: Moving a Complex Community Process toward Success

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This article chronicles an on-going effort of local community and cultural groups to preserve and interpret the abandoned historic buildings of the Bethlehem Steel Corporation in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. Advocates for the site, with help from the Mid-Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities (MARCH), are working with private developers to adapt and re-use the site. Outlining the complex process of persuading city officials and developers of the value of saving the plant and the interplay of local, state, regional, and national influences that shape the project, the author raises questions about the fragility of a public/private/nonprofit alliance, suggests new strategies public historians might adopt for industrial sites, and comments on the danger that the expense of saving industrial sites poses to communities, even when history is a community priority. Documents and news coverage relating to the project can be read in full at www.march.rutgers.edu/bethsteel.htm.

THE CITY OF BETHLEHEM, PENNSYLVANIA IS POISED to reclaim, redevelop, and interpret historically the enormous industrial site left behind by the bankrupt Bethlehem Steel corporation. The journey from plant closure in 1998 to today's plans for historically respectful redevelopment took the community through a failed effort by the corporation to control its own legacy and a multi-year stalemate that nearly resulted in the leveling of the historic struc-

tures. Sustained efforts by disparate community-based groups to document the site's history and raise public awareness of it, combined with strategic media coverage, intervention by interested state, regional, and national organizations, and key changes in political leadership and site ownership have revitalized the project and brightened its future.

The Bethlehem Steel site still faces enormous challenges, however. Unlike other major recent industrial redevelopment efforts, no local, state, or national organization is committed to making major investments in "The Steel," nor are the local universities actively engaged in supporting interpretation of the site. No anchoring institution or dedicated funding stream currently exists to support interpretation. Moreover, the new owners of the site, a consortium of local and New York-based real estate investors who call themselves Bethlehem Works Now, propose to fund redevelopment principally by building and operating a new state-licensed slots casino. In the spring of 2005, Sands Casino, parent company of the Venetian Resort and Casino in Las Vegas, secured a majority interest in Bethlehem Works Now. It remains to be seen how the community's success in reorienting development from demolition to respectful re-use might be compromised by this Faustian bargain with legalized gambling and for-profit interests. For public historians, Bethlehem presents a key case study in the challenges of working with a single profit-driven partner to preserve and interpret a large American industrial site.

Communities do legitimately seek for-profit partners to drive economic redevelopment, especially within such a large-scale effort. Industrial sites are daunting to preservationists not just because they are usually huge and frequently toxic but also because they represent essential economic resources that communities want to re-activate to restore lost jobs and lost community prosperity. Even those committed to the history of industrial sites understand that straightforward historic preservation on the model of historic homes simply does not meet community needs. Nor can museum uses alone generate the wealth needed to preserve historic structures on this scale. Besides the physical and financial challenges, saving industrial sites can be complicated by mixed community feeling. The lost industry commonly provided a focus of proud identity for the whole community, so the abandoned site taps deep veins of betrayal and rage along with pride and nostalgia in the industrial workers and families who still live nearby. In Bethlehem, for instance, while some former steelworkers labored to preserve the history of their work life, others cursed the corporation, pronounced a pox on the site, and refused to talk about memories too painful to rehearse. Because Bethlehem faces all these challenges and more, the on-going story of this industrial preservation effort is all the more useful as an example of what resolute community activists and good humanities leadership can and cannot accomplish.

Bethlehem Steel operated in one form or another in the city from 1857 when investors opened the Saucon Iron Works to 1998 when the corporation shut down the blast furnaces for the last time. As Saucon Iron Works and then as Bethlehem Iron Company, the company specialized in making wrought-

iron railroad rails. Keeping pace with technological innovation and railroad demand, the iron company became Bethlehem Steel Company in 1899, building its reputation by making flanged steel beams for both buildings and railroad tracks. Financial scandals had driven the Steel Company to the verge of bankruptcy in 1904, when Charles M. Schwab intervened, bringing in fresh investors and management and reincorporating as the Bethlehem Steel Corporation. Known locally simply as “The Steel,” the Bethlehem Steel Corporation employed generations of steelworkers making rails, I-beams for skyscrapers and highway roadbeds, guns and steel cladding for naval warships, and key components for suspension bridges. Shipyards belonging to Bethlehem Steel dotted the eastern, southern, and western shores of the United States, while iconic structures like the Empire State Building and the Golden Gate Bridge drew their strength and flexibility from Bethlehem Steel products. Bethlehem made huge guns and rolled steel plates to arm and protect the United States Navy in World War II. And after the war, Bethlehem Steel products helped to rebuild the devastated economies and communities of Europe and Asia. The Steel employed 165,000 people in 1957 but began to decline sharply in the 1970s. Falling to international competition and inept management, the corporation closed the Bethlehem plant in 1998 and went entirely bankrupt in 2003, leaving thousands of steelworkers without jobs, pensions, or medical care and leaving the city with a 160-acre industrial brownfield housing the physical remnants of the last surviving fully integrated American steel mill.

Facing the reality of imminent plant closure in the early 1990s, Bethlehem Steel Corporation initiated a project called *Bethlehem Works*, an effort to blend new recreational uses and historic interpretation on the site that has ultimately complicated the challenges facing this community. As part of *Bethlehem Works*, the corporation concluded an agreement with The Smithsonian Institution to create a national museum of American industrial history in one or two of the old buildings, using significant industrial artifacts owned by the Smithsonian but no longer on display in Washington. Those artifacts were moved to Bethlehem and placed under the curatorial stewardship of the Historic Bethlehem Partnership. A National Museum of Industrial History (NMIH) was incorporated and exhibit and site designs commissioned with every expectation that Bethlehem Steel Corporation would continue to provide major funding for the effort. Their confidence in sustained corporate control of the *Bethlehem Works* project led the NMIH project leadership to select a board and management team connected to the Steel and skilled at promoting the endeavor in preference to a team strong in areas of non-profit development, community-organizing, curatorial caretaking, or historical research.

The museum project survived the legal dissolution of Bethlehem Steel Corporation in 2003, but only as a shell of the original impulse. Plowing on in its weakened state, NMIH decided neither to adapt its goals to the changed realities nor to initiate the civic engagement needed to recruit new allies. Despite the local community’s widespread longing to see education and inter-



Blast furnaces, Bethlehem Steel, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, 2005. (Photo by David Andrews, courtesy of the National Park Service)

pretation honoring the steel industry somewhere on the site, the museum team could not generate either the cash flow or the community support it needed. NMIH compounded its weakness by remaining rigidly committed to the *Bethlehem Works* designs and putting off, albeit cordially, a variety of local community groups willing to construct new, mutually beneficial relationships with the museum. The project missed a key benchmark in 2004 that would have released long-promised state funding, and now has only one full-time staff member, the nominal director. Despite reorganizing its board, hiring new fund-raising consultants, and announcing a summer 2004 fund-raising campaign with sharply reduced goals (which it again did not meet), the NMIH project continues to struggle.

Unfortunately for all concerned, NMIH's continuing presence and lack of imaginative engagement has turned it into a net liability—like a dead tree whose shadow stunts the seedlings around its base. After a decade of formal existence, not only is no museum in place, but also other independent local efforts have been weakened and promising opportunities squandered through the absence of vision and effective collaboration. For instance, NMIH bears some responsibility for the lack of public investment in preserving and interpreting the site. NMIH's refusal to collaborate with local community groups helped prevent these diverse constituencies from generating the collective political influence that might have secured meaningful public investment, if not nationally then at least locally or statewide. Other challenging industrial sites, like the Lachine Canal redevelopment in Montreal, Canada, did secure public spending from national and municipal authorities willing to bear the initial costs in order to draw private investors to the project. The Pennsylva-

nia Historic and Museum Commission worked hard through the 1990s to develop a statewide industrial history trail linking, marketing, and supporting interpretation at sites related to the state's coal, iron, steel, and oil industries. Within twenty miles of Bethlehem, other sites prospered through their involvement with that effort, but not the NMIH.

Moreover, NMIH did little to support research and study of the history it intended to interpret. Despite having on its board the presidents of Bethlehem's two major intellectual centers, Lehigh University and Moravian College, the museum project never created a local analog to the Center for the Study of Lowell that exists at the University of Massachusetts and supports interpretation at the Lowell National Historic Park. Had the NMIH recast its vision early, such a center might now be available to study the history of steel-making and steel workers, support site interpretation, and retain locally and in public hands the corporation's huge collections of images, artifacts, and business papers. The public continues to support the idea of creating a museum on the Bethlehem Steel site, with the NMIH functioning simply as a placeholder for that hope.

Other people in and around Bethlehem, however, have been thinking innovatively about what to do with the site and its history, including Jeffrey A. Parks, president of ArtsQuest, sponsor of Bethlehem's hugely successful annual Musikfest. Parks helped redevelop an old southside warehouse into an arts and performance center called The Banana Factory. Bruce Ward, a steelworker-turned-videographer, teamed with Billee Nickell Smith and others to create The Steelworkers' Archives project, a grassroots effort to collect the memories of steelworkers on videotape. The National Canal Museum in Easton, Pennsylvania began gathering archival material, artifacts, and photographs related to The Steel and provided safe housing for several truckloads of the corporation's business records.¹ The Save Our Steel foundation created a website to promote public awareness and involvement in determining the future of the site. International Steel Group (ISG), which took over the site from bankruptcy court in 2003, had even permitted extremely limited and occasional touring of the site in the company of the individual in charge of site security, himself a former steelworker.

The site first came to my attention in late 2003, quite by chance, when a familial connection enabled me to go on one of those occasional tours of the plant. The gritty authenticity of the buildings and equipment and the eerie echoes of its army of workers make an irresistible argument for preservation. The blast furnaces, the ore cars, the Welfare Room where workers showered and changed in and out of their work clothes, the machine shops, and the gargantuan blowers that fired the furnaces dramatize unforgettably the scale of

1. The most valuable records were claimed some years ago by the Hagley Museum and Library, an archive of early American industrial history located in Delaware. Other records are scattered around the country, in places where Bethlehem Steel had works, shipyards, or business operations. Substantial photographic and artifact collections remain in private hands.



Lockable storage for workers' belongings, Bethlehem Steel, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, 2005. Steelworkers used these storage baskets to safeguard their belongings while they were working. Baskets were raised to the ceiling on chains which individual workers then locked in place. (Photo by David Andrews, courtesy of the National Park Service)

American steelmaking and mutely justify the pride of steelworkers themselves in what was accomplished there. By the end of the tour I was hooked and looking for a way to help.

At this juncture, a development group called the Delaware Valley Real Estate Investment Fund had a legal and financial interest in the site, and local people suspected that they planned to clear it for a new shopping mall, repeating what had happened to Pittsburgh's famous Homestead steelworks. International Steel Group was not talking to the community or the city, nor was the developer. ArtsQuest had a coalition of groups interested in relocating to a redeveloped Steel site and some investments pledged, but the landowners were not listening. The NMIH project team had generated some letters to the newspapers, the mayor, and the city council in support of saving the historic structures, but NMIH staff worried that they would wake up

one day to find bulldozers at the gates ready to take it all down. Neither city government nor private industry could imagine where to find enough money to save and restore the site, so the momentum seemed to be turning toward clearing it for new purely commercial uses.

After meeting and talking with the NMIH staff and with the steelworkers who created Steelworkers' Archives, it seemed to me that the Mid-Atlantic Regional Center for the Humanities (MARCH) might have some essential resources to offer. MARCH, based at Rutgers University's Camden, New Jersey campus, and directed by urban historian Howard Gillette, is one of eight regional humanities centers around the country that were launched in 2001 with challenge grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities. MARCH's mission is to deliver the opportunities and resources humanities professionals need to do exemplary and innovative work in the mid-Atlantic region. With a very small staff, MARCH makes the most of its abilities by intervening in targeted and catalytic fashion. In Bethlehem, we saw an opportunity to empower the local community to win political support by helping to create a unified community vision for the future of the site.

A bit of fresh energy blew through Bethlehem in the first months of 2004. The United States Conference of Mayors had invited the city's new mayor, John Callahan, to make a presentation about The Steel and Bethlehem redevelopment to his colleagues at their 72nd annual meeting in January 2004. Mayors from around the country embraced the possibilities represented by the Steel site, convincing Mayor Callahan that what had seemed an albatross could in fact become the jewel in the city's crown.

Returning to Bethlehem, Mayor Callahan found eager support for this perspective from the collection of small community groups long concerned to save the site. MARCH had stepped in by then, and the mayor agreed to endorse an all-day workshop planned for March 27, 2004 and co-sponsored by MARCH and Historic Bethlehem Partnership, the long-time stewards of the Smithsonian's artifacts. Called "Back to Work at The Steel," the workshop was designed to craft a shared vision for the site that could get all the disparate interest groups, including NMIH, moving in the same direction. Mayor Callahan came to welcome the participants and emphasize his commitment to historically sensitive redevelopment on the site. He also delegated three staff members to attend the entire day-long event and announced that, with support from the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the city would sponsor a charette during the summer of 2004 to bring the community groups, innovative designers, and potential users of the site together to brainstorm about its future.

Heartened by this promising prospect, representatives of a dozen groups gathered for the day, along with two "outsiders" that MARCH added to the mix, Robert Rathbun, executive director of the Sloss Furnaces National Historic Landmark in Birmingham, Alabama, and Peter Neill, then president of the South Street Seaport Museum in New York City. Rathbun assured the group that preserving a landmark on this scale was both possible and useful to the community in many ways. Neill shared a host of experiences with cre-

ating a mixed-used historic area at South Street that combined retail, recreational, transportation, and residential uses with a museum and historic waterfront. These outside perspectives reinforced the community's sense of the value of the site and its history, and demonstrated that others well beyond Bethlehem could feel a stake in what happened there.

The statement that emerged from the workshop, called *Vision and Vitality—Bethlehem after The Steel: A vision of community development based on adaptive re-use of historic portions of Bethlehem Steel Corporation's industrial plant*, balanced what each group could do on its own with goals the whole coalition could meet through collaboration. Workshop participants agreed on three goals:

1. Strengthen the public's role in deciding the future of the 160-acre historic area so that the re-use of the site meets Bethlehem's community development goals.
2. Begin the interpretation of the industrial heritage of Bethlehem at once, even before the site's future is secured. Interpretation should address the fullness of industrial history, involve residents, visitors, and local institutions in interpretive activities, and take place throughout Bethlehem and the Delaware and Lehigh National Heritage Corridor as well as on the plant site, and
3. Pursue the interpretive project with multiple partners in stages over time, with all activity guided by a shared approach toward the collective vision. The organizing principles of the shared approach include building on the authenticity of place, including regional and national interpretive content, developing socially oriented education at all levels, and promoting pervasive community involvement.

By embracing these goals, *Vision and Vitality* sought to broaden the ambition of community-based advocates, who had been focused on saving the site, to include using educational and program tools to tell the stories on or beyond the site itself.

The day after the workshop, the area's major newspaper, *The Morning Call*, published an investigative piece on the NMIH arguing that it had paid nearly as much in salaries as it had raised, without establishing any viable future for the proposed museum. Then, in early April 2004, Delaware Valley Real Estate Investment Fund withdrew its bid to buy the Steel site from ISG, removing the immediate threat of demolition. Together with the questions raised about the future of the NMIH, the withdrawal of the developers broadened the potential impact of the city's planned charette and opened up the possibility of securing a developer for the site committed to the community's shared vision for historically sensitive redevelopment.

At the same time, awareness of the precarious position of the site was spreading. The Philadelphia *Inquirer* did a major story on the site and the NMIH in late February 2004. Preservation Pennsylvania, a statewide, private nonprofit organization dedicated to the protection of historically and archi-

tecturally significant properties, applied to the National Trust for Historic Preservation asking that the Steel plant be designated an endangered site. On May 24, 2004, the National Trust named the plant one of its 11 Most Endangered Historic Sites for 2004, calling for “an innovative redevelopment approach that retains the key aspects of the plant while integrating new, compatible infill construction.”²

In early summer, Saucon Valley resident Michael Perrucci began to take an interest in the site. A potential developer with new private money, Perrucci garnered support from members of the city council and secured the postponement and eventual abandonment of the city-run charette. Community groups and the MARCH coalition lobbied to preserve the charette as an important resource for ordinary citizens of Bethlehem and the Lehigh Valley to express their hopes for the site and as a sign that the process of development would be more open and public than it had been in the past. But by the fall of 2004, it was clear that the city government was prepared to cede to Perrucci and his partners the leadership on interpretation as well as economic redevelopment. Perrucci’s group of investors, calling themselves *Bethlehem Works Now*, spent considerable time talking to each of the participating community groups separately, including the NMIH, while they worked out the legal and financial matters incident to making a bid on the site. Without minimizing the challenge of securing historic interpretation in collaboration with a for-profit partner, the coalition formed around the MARCH workshop nevertheless felt confident that the new developers had heard their shared vision. The series of summer and fall meetings seemed to persuade Perrucci that a historically sensitive approach to the site would create a unique environment that would support his economic aims.

Meanwhile, several of the coalition partners moved in modest ways to address the scarcity of good scholarship and research available to support interpretation and design. One of the local community activists, Amey Senape of Save Our Steel, enrolled at Lehigh University to pursue an advanced degree in public history. MARCH, Historic Bethlehem Partnership, and the Delaware and Lehigh Heritage Corridor project jointly supported a Community Fellowship for Senape, giving her the task of assembling a comprehensive list of comparable preservation and re-use projects and annotating a bibliography of relevant contemporary scholarship ranging widely across industrial, labor, community, and economic history. MARCH also organized its 2004 annual meeting in Washington, D.C. around the theme of industrial history. The meeting included a workshop featuring the Steelworkers’ Archives and ended with University of Pittsburgh historian Dr. Edward K. Muller delivering the Fredric M. Miller Memorial Lecture, a wide-ranging, thoughtful, and innovative examination of “Industrial Preservation: Connecting People, Place, and History.”³

2. Nicole Radziewich, “Steel listed as endangered historic site: Trust’s designation could help raise money for industrial museum,” *The Morning Call*, 25 May 2004.

3. See the full text of this address at www.march.rutgers.edu/bethsteel.htm.

For all the work going on around the coalition's goals, no mechanism yet existed to open the process of planning to the Bethlehem community. The Save Our Steel foundation, reorganized as Friends of the Steel during the fall of 2004, moved to meet that challenge. With modest support from MARCH, the Friends hosted six community forums at various locations around the city, inviting people to share both broad concerns and specific ideas. The forums brought out an overwhelming vote of support for preservation and honoring the history of steel and the experiences of steelworkers while also making space for new retail, residential, recreation, and transportation developments. The Friends completed a forum report in January 2005, outlining six principal goals that community members cherish for the site: (1) preserving the buildings and the look and feel of the site, (2) integrating the redeveloped areas with the nearby neighborhoods, (3) creating mixed uses so the site is populated night and day, (4) making room for open space and pedestrian access, (5) providing innovative transportation facilities, and (6) welcoming sustained community involvement.

Participants in the community forums laid out their vision in engaging and innovative detail, suggesting that the site have hiking and biking trails and a renewed waterfront with a rowing run and a pedestrian bridge to connect the long-divided north and south sides of town. They asked that city streets be extended onto the site to link it to the community. They called for a bus, train, and trolley transportation hub located there to serve users of the residential and recreation facilities in the interior of the site and to enhance Bethlehem's already burgeoning economic role as a feeder community to jobs in New York and Philadelphia.

In the midst of the forum series, *Bethlehem Works Now* stunned and pleased the community in mid-December 2004 by releasing a series of attractive and historically sensitive designs for the site in the pages of *The Morning Call*. *BethWorks Now* had divided the site into three major zones, an eastern sector considered commercial, a central sector around the most historic buildings that they called the historic area, and a third community area that was connected by the street grid and by its planned uses to the South Side neighborhood. Reiterating their support for some kind of museum on the site, the team also proposed a range of new uses for the most problematic and threatened, but arguably one of the most important, buildings on the site, Machine Shop #2. The 300,000-square-foot machine shop, once the largest industrial building in the world, sprawls nearly the length of the site. The designers envisioned converting it into upscale stores, eateries, and residential loft apartments laced with public spaces that would be used for historic interpretation. In addition to such encouraging news about existing buildings, the *BethWorks Now* designs for new construction affirmed the developers' interest in preserving the industrial look and feel of the site and in featuring the Steel works as the unique identity anchoring the new development. The designs included a drawing of a new arena they wanted to build that would put the huge blast furnaces boldly at center stage, framed and visible through

a glass backstage wall. The tribute to the blast furnaces was heartfelt and welcome, as was the developers' commitment to "pay symbolic homage to Bethlehem Steel's legacy by using existing buildings, illuminating the blast furnaces and blending industrial motifs into its design."⁴ Finally, site plans included the round-the-clock usage the community so desired by providing facilities for Musikfest and other cultural events.

Most people involved with either historic preservation or community development around the Steel site felt that victory was at hand. The long meetings with the new developers and the city's ready support of their work had produced a mixed-use approach that could generate jobs, end the site's physical isolation, encourage and support existing cultural activities, and maintain both aesthetic and interpretive connections to the steel industry.

But the happy news came at a price, a price that has become increasingly hard for the community and public history advocates to swallow. *BethWorks Now* had determined that realizing their plans for the site, including these substantial commitments to preservation and adaptation, could cost as much as \$879 million and take as long as twenty-five years. Looking to shorten the period of redevelopment to five years, they announced that they would try to secure a different scale of income by winning a state license to build a slots casino and hotel on the eastern commercial sector of the property.⁵ Recently legalized with the strong support of Pennsylvania Governor Edward Rendell, casino gambling seemed to the developers an ideal way to produce both foot traffic and revenue. The deal included (by law) that state taxes on casino revenue would be used to fund public education, reducing pressure on local property taxes, and also specified that casino owners would contribute to local governments to support police and social services. The casino planned by *BethWorks Now* promised a \$10 million annual contribution to Bethlehem's approximately \$30 million municipal budget.

Community feeling divided sharply about bringing a slots casino to Bethlehem. Some embraced the plan eagerly as a source of new jobs and new energy. Others accepted it ruefully, as the key to funding the urgently desired redevelopment at The Steel. Still others objected strenuously to gambling as a short-term solution, ethically corrupt, and liable to create only poorly paid jobs and a host of social ills. Moreover, many people feared that building the Steel site development around a slots casino would draw visitors who spent their time gambling rather than exploring and supporting Bethlehem's restaurants, historic sites, and culture. The isolation of gamblers would minimize the positive spinoffs of the new development for Main Street businesses and the new entrepreneurs of Bethlehem's South Side renaissance, reestablish-

4. Chuck Ayers and Matt Assad, "BethWorks plan keeps furnaces, not museum: Proposal would turn Steel machine shop into stores and lofts," *The Morning Call*, 17 December 2004.

5. The state has very few licenses to award, and competition for these around the state, and even within the Lehigh Valley, has been fierce. Another local group proposes to locate a casino near a highway interchange just outside of Bethlehem. Licenses will be awarded by a state commission in 2006.

ing in a new form the historic isolation of the Bethlehem Steel site from the neighborhood.

The debate over the Bethlehem slots casino also raised important issues for industrial preservation. Stabilizing, preserving, and restoring industrial buildings costs a tremendous amount of money, while the very presence of industrial relics usually means that the community—no matter how clever or dedicated—no longer commands that kind of wealth. But is the interpreting community comfortable accepting that only organized vice can generate the essential resources? Moreover, while the prospects for preservation in Bethlehem are certainly improving, the prospects for interpretation continue to suffer from the fatal absence of an anchoring institution through which to coordinate scholarship, collections management, and program development. None of the individual members of the Vision and Vitality coalition have the strength to take on all those tasks, nor can any of them act as a responsible repository for the needed levels of foundation, government, or corporate support.

When Mr. Perrucci invited the first public discussion of the *Bethlehem Works Now* plans in February 2005, he made it clear that the plans depended upon the slots casino. But while public support for *BethWorks Now* remains very high, support for bringing organized gambling to Bethlehem has continued to erode. According to a survey done in May 2005 by public policy students at Lehigh University, only a minority (46 percent) of area and city residents want to see gambling come to town, but a strong majority (64 percent) support the *BethWorks Now* vision for the Steel site.⁶

School districts are playing a key role in eroding support for gambling, as they sour on the benefits of the promised new revenue. School boards who expected to benefit from state taxes on casino revenues increasingly believe that the new revenue, if it comes at all, would mostly substitute for rather than supplement established state and local funding streams, while accepting the terms of the casino law will tie their hands in raising needed revenue from local property taxes. Statewide and in Bethlehem, an overwhelming majority of school districts have rejected the new funds, forcing the state legislature to reconsider the whole project.⁷ While public support drops and the casino law comes under new scrutiny, the *BethWorks Now* team has also made some ominous changes, including selling a majority ownership share to their casino partner and indicating to staff at Historic Bethlehem Partnership that, while they continue to support having historic interpretation on the Steel site, they are not prepared to pay for its development.

The situation in Bethlehem could move in many directions, but there is much that public historians can learn from the process already. If the casino

6. Josh Drobnyk, "South Side slots favored by region: Some wary of gaming in Bethlehem, but also back casino, poll finds," *The Morning Call*, 12 May 2005.

7. Charles Meredith, "Officials ponder what went wrong with Act 72," *The Morning Call*, 9 June 2005.

is approved and built, the public history community must still face the challenge of creating an anchor institution capable of sustaining interpretive work. If doubts about the viability of the casino law sink the promising and popular *BethWorks Now* vision, the community will find itself with yet another set of plans for the site that are too grandiose to be achieved. Then much will depend on whether the current coalition can be more adaptable, innovative, and collaborative than NMIH was under similar circumstances. Coalition members continue to communicate with the developer and with city leaders, share effort and insight among themselves, and work together to create small interpretive projects, using oral histories, curriculum development, and similar approaches that can work whether or not the site itself is accessible, attractive, or even safe.

The struggle over Bethlehem Steel also highlights a role that the public history community could play—if it equipped itself in new ways—in preserving this huge industrial site and others like it. With or without these developers and the casino plan, it seems clear that public historians working with private developers must secure some “interpretive independence” through the control of funding earmarked specifically for interpretation. Similar early but rapidly fading corporate interest in historic interpretation characterized the development of New York’s South Street Seaport Museum, which struggled for years to secure visible and appropriate gallery space within the renovated commercial and residential district. Though there is no need to assume a fixed antagonism between for-profit ownership and the interpreting community, the avid early interest of the private developers in the Bethlehem site’s unique history has also faded too fast and too completely to promise a fruitful long-term interdependence.

One avenue toward interpretive independence might be to engage the regional or national public history community to mobilize both the municipal government and the Congressional delegation to secure public funding for historic interpretation at The Steel. Seeking public funds is a thoroughly legitimate path to take for these great sites. Many American landmarks, including treasures like Ellis Island in New York harbor and Independence Hall in Philadelphia, were nearly lost while community activists labored to secure public investment. Public funds have provided the crucial resources to preserve battlefields, national parks, rivers and recreation areas, and a host of other neglected cultural and historical amenities that are now widely cherished. Mobilizing this same public consciousness around the relics of American industry is surely one of public history’s most important contemporary tasks.

Another approach would be for humanities professionals to commission the economic studies needed to show the differential value a unique historical identity brings to a mixed-use redevelopment. Persuading philanthropists or foundations to support such economic studies would be a first step. Then a properly professional economic argument might be mobilized to persuade private investors like *Bethlehem Works Now* that funds committed to historic interpretation have the same utility as funds committed to marketing, with

perhaps far greater value per dollar spent. The results might indeed surprise and energize the whole field. If public historians could credibly measure what our sites and programs and exhibits are worth to our communities, this might fundamentally change the way we approach our work.

These are new frontiers for historic preservationists and humanities professionals. Successful industrial preservation may turn out to require that nonprofits develop new strategies for funding, new linkages with for-profit partners, and collaborations with government programs to foster entrepreneurship or with urban planners to think through the long-term community impact of various redevelopment strategies. It may be possible for humanities leadership to help establish the value of slowing down the redevelopment of large sites, or encouraging banks to create revolving resource funds that allow smaller or poorer communities to work on their industrial history at a pace they can sustain and afford. For now, MARCH and the other humanities groups involved in Bethlehem continue to strategize and push for thoughtful redevelopment of the Steel site in ways that will serve both the local community and the wider region.

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