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Market Price

Uncovering the truth behind one PA city's downtown development hype

Destination Downtown

By **Matt Smith**

It all started with a simple postcard. A few weeks ago, this intrepid reporter dropped into Northern Light coffeehouse in downtown Scranton for an afternoon pick-me-up. And while waiting on the perpetually chatty baristas, I perused the fliers and brochures on the nearby counter, and discovered a small, smartly designed rectangle touting, of all things, the hip-ness of York, Pa., and offering the following strange question: "What is Codo?"

Now as a Lancaster native, intrigue immediately followed, as did befuddlement. To Central Pennsylvanians, the White Rose City (York) is to the Red Rose City (Lancaster) as, say, some NEPA-ites view the relationship between Wilkes-Barre and Scranton: it's smaller, more dangerous, and even further behind the times. But as Scranton and Wilkes-Barre's respective downtown development efforts move forward in fits and starts, that intrigue came in seeing whether or not an equivalent Pennsylvania municipality was actually ahead of the curve in injecting life into its downtown.

Sure, York has some historic Revolutionary War-era buildings, and a Harley-Davidson motorcycle factory out on Route 30, but it's not exactly been known as a hotspot for progressive, urban-centric initiatives - but rather for crime imported from Baltimore, 45 minutes to the south, and the lingering pain of a 1969 race riot.

But this slick marketing piece looked like something from a big city, not little old York, and it pointed toward a "What is Codo?" Web site. On that teaser page, you could complete a brief lifestyle questionnaire, or find your way to that modern harbinger of reaching out to the cool kids - Codo's very own mySpace page.

The next clue in this detective tale came in the form of an e-mail invitation to a Codo unveiling across the street from York's new baseball park, Sovereign Bank Stadium, the home field for the just-formed York Revolution of the independent Atlantic League. The press conference promised music by a local band, free T-shirts, and then an after-party at the ballgame with food and beer - enough reasons for a 148-mile road trip down interstates 81 and 83.

Having been around the marketing buzz-building block a few times, there seemed to be 99 percent certainty that Codo was some sort of downtown development project, and that instinct was spot-on. As the designated coordinates neared at the end of a two-and-a-half-hour journey, the baseball stadium popped into view, as did a former auto parts factory with a few hundred 20- and 30-somethings gathered outside - most wearing matching black T-shirts emblazoned with the "What is Codo?" slogan.

As befuddled looking older folks ambled past the corner of North George and North streets, rockers Kingsfoil played under a tent until Codo spokesperson/

guru took to the microphone for some prepared remarks. The late-30ish Swartz, a York native who moved back to the city from Montana a few years ago, spouted facts like "more than 130,000 people in York County are under the age of 25," with assertions such as "That's not a ripple. It's a tidal wave."

Referencing rock bands like The Hold Steady and even quoting a Killers song, Swartz came off as unlikely but effective combination of real estate agent and hipster promoter. He built up to the unveiling of architectural drawings of the Codo project, a $9.5 million assemblage of rental lofts and flats, townhouses, and commercial space. The 75,000-square-foot compound will feature amenities like iPod docks on a roof deck and an Internet-wired cafe on the ground floor, in addition to "green" building techniques and decorative flourishes provided by local artists.

The first portion will open in a year, but when reached via phone a couple days after the event, Swartz said "we already have nine applications for the units, and there are only 36 total. ... Ultimately, we want to do 150 units in the next three years ... and the market study we commissioned said there's room for 700 to 800."

Financially, Swartz said the project was spurred on by an $800,000 low-interest loan from the state. Demographics-wise, he noted that York is helped by its "crossroads" location.

"We're central in that D.C.-Baltimore-Harrisburg area, which helps."

"I think a lot of people (in York) have spent time in Baltimore, D.C., and Philly, in New York," Swartz added, "and when they returned, they realized there were a lot of people in that same boat. And they responded to something upbeat, energetic, and more modern."

The stadium sits just to the north, and is bordered by the Codorus Creek, which is where the "Codo" name comes from (like SoHo; get it?). And just south on North George Street, there is a small but vibrant grouping of bars, restaurants, and cultural venues. But, said Swartz, "part of the problem is that there's not a hub to find out where things are." Cue the "lifestyles" offshoot of Codo's Web site, www.freshyorkpa.com.

"There's a lot to do if you live in this area and are an active person ..." he said. "And we really think we can help create a little bit of a community here. We're informing people of events and helping facilitate that knowledge of what's going on - telling them 'you can have a great time living here.'"

And Swartz thinks the "What is Codo?" marketing campaign has been integral to the project's success so far, and encourages any developer or municipality making a similar effort to pay serious attention to buzz-building.

"You can't underestimate the power of the marketing to create the buzz. It's not that you're creating a market, but you can't get the energy of the investors and the developers until you've gathered the people to support it. It's like a chicken-or-egg thing. And you can't get the people to support it until you have the money to raise awareness ..."

"The rest is all just hard work," he added. "The key is the marketing, to get people focused on one property and on one idea, of this walk-able urbanism, and it works if you have that momentum. If it's just a bunch of people dipping their toe in the water, whether it's tenants or investors, you're not going to get anywhere. People have got to be all-in."

And just how did that postcard make it all the way to Scranton. "I'm still trying to figure that out," said Swartz, who pointed me toward Melissa Jones, the freelance graphic designer/marketing person ultimately responsible for the "What is Codo?" campaign.

"I really don't know," said Jones, a York native who recently returned to Central Pennsylvania from Las Vegas. "We covered York with them and tried to get some out in Lancaster and in the Harrisburg area. But somebody must have been pretty impressed with it and must have taken it back there."

And in York, said Jones, Codo has become a household name.

"Everybody goes around saying 'What is Codo?'" she said, "even if they already know what it is."

For more information about Codo, visit www.codoyork.com or www.freshyorkpa.com.