

*With Penn's help, they are creating a beautification plan for the site.*

# Students putting minds to work to redevelop Bensalem riverfront

By Dwayne Campbell  
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

**BENSALEM** — In their young minds, they see a giant fountain sprouting water in the air, luring locals and tourists alike to the Delaware riverfront.

They see cobblestone walkways, cafes, sculptures and public art dotting the waterfront beside the old mansions and buffering the industrial acres.

Some see a cultural center for music, dance and art exhibitions, and shaded areas for games, including a chess pavilion.

Extravagant? Unattainable?

Or exactly the fresh ideas the mostly aging waterfront needs to transform it into the economic engine it once was, while leaving room for new residences and space for public access?

The concepts for changing the township's riverfront are rough now, but a group of about 50 Bensalem High School students are working on a redevelopment plan they hope will withstand scrutiny from the public and professionals.

They also must bear in mind that the county is working on an official redevelopment plan for Bensalem and five other Lower Bucks towns that run along 25 miles of the Delaware River.

In December, the county team will select one of 17 proposals that professional firms have submitted in a bid to snag a \$340,000 contract to study the riverfront. The county team now is in the process of reviewing the proposals.

But it is good to have the teens involved, the professionals say, adding that it is unusual to find high school students working with college mentors on such a large-scale public endeavor.

The University of Pennsylvania School of Design is spearheading the student project.

"These young people will come up with some far-fetched things and some great things, but that's the purpose of doing a study," said Robert White, executive director of the Bucks County Redevelopment Authority, which is coordinating the county project. "You can't get too many ideas."

At 6 p.m. today at the high school, students are scheduled to conduct their first public forum, where they hope to get reac-

## Public Comment

Bensalem High School students will present preliminary findings and seek public input about the future of Bensalem's riverfront at 6 p.m. today at Bensalem High School, 4319 Hulmeville Rd.

tions and suggestions from residents interested in the riverfront.

"We're getting a chance to present ideas about something important in Bensalem," Kathy Towell, 17, said last week as she sat by the Delaware sketching her surroundings.

While Towell and another student, Eric Cowan, 18, were drawing, about 20 other students explored the waterfront and woods in Neshaminy State Park that occupies 330 acres, some along the river.

Other students took photographs or examined foliage. Komal Patel, 17, and Priya Patel, 17, conducted chemical tests on the water.

"Whatever we do, we need to know how it will affect the water," Priya Patel said. "This is practical research."

Some students have made trips to the local historical society to research what the Delaware riverfront looked like before they were born.

Over many years, as manufacturing dwindled and industries along the river shuttered, a significant portion of the once-bustling waterfront became brownfields that have been difficult to redevelop. In the last decade that saw failed attempts to bring riverboat gambling to the Delaware, hodgepodge revitalization has occurred in Bensalem and other Lower Bucks towns along the river.

The high school students' involvement is an after-school program with guidance from several teachers and graduate landscape-architecture students at Penn.

"What the high school students are doing is of great value," said Harris Steinberg, executive director of Penn Praxis, the university's design-studio arm that is overseeing the students' redevelopment plan. "When the larger county planning

starts, Bensalem will be ahead of the curve."

The student project, which started last month and is volunteer work, will end in December, followed by a presentation to the township in January.

The university's Graduate School of Education also is involved, following the model it used to solicit ideas and public input for redevelopment of Penn's Landing. The graduate school also is incorporating its Project 540, part of a national effort aimed at engaging students in civic initiatives.

Penn Praxis, which serves as a studio for the university's students but also takes on sponsored projects, is being paid \$25,000 from the Bensalem Economic Development Corporation to analyze the waterfront and suggest improvement plans.

The quasi-governmental economic development group is not using any township money for the study, according to executive director George Flocco. But the project is worth the cost, he said, especially because local students are benefiting.

"The cost is minimal for what we're getting," Flocco said.

In addition to helping host the Penn's Landing sessions and the Bensalem students, Penn Praxis has done work for large government entities, including a plan to redevelop the 46-square-mile Jurong area at the western end of Singapore, and another commissioned by the mayor of Granada, Spain, for a biotech park.

Bensalem Mayor Joseph DiGirolamo, a strong riverfront-redevelopment advocate, was interested in the Penn Praxis study but latched on firmly to the project when the plan included Bensalem students. He broached the subject with School Superintendent Victoria Gehrt, who saw an educational opening for her students.

"I thought it was an extraordinary opportunity," DiGirolamo said. "They will learn a lot about the river and things in the community. If you do a survey, you'll find a lot of people living here don't know anything about the riverfront."

Contact staff writer Dwayne Campbell at 215-702-7815 or [dcampbell@phillynews.com](mailto:dcampbell@phillynews.com).