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# Perspective

## What's your opinion?

Send "In My Opinion" submissions to Helen Colwell Adams, P.O. Box 1328, Lancaster, PA. 17608-1328, or e-mail to hcolwell@lnpnews.com Columns should be no more than 800 words.

## Build on success to revitalize city

*Why take huge chances on a convention center and hotel when existing institutions could lead the way?*

BY ROBERT E. FIELD  
*Special to the Sunday News*

In planning for the future it is important to avoid mistakes of the past; and building on current successes is less risky than pursuing untested concepts.

With the proposed convention center/hotel, it is especially urgent that we avoid the mistakes that led to the failure of Lancaster Square, or we may

go down the same disastrous road.

The reasons for that failure, as given by former mayor and guest columnist Art Morris on Aug. 18, were very wide of the mark.

When Lancaster Square was developed a quarter-century ago, it was anchored by the Hilton Hotel (currently the Brunswick) and the Hess Department Store.

The Hess opening so contradicted

the national trend that the Wall Street Journal ran a front-page story heralding it to be the first new department store in a downtown location in 20 years. With department stores abandoning downtown locations in favor of suburban malls, Hess struggled from the outset and closed a few years later!

The newly opened Hilton Hotel was, as Morris correctly recalls, indeed a delight. But it could not survive national trends either: Downtown hotels struggled then and now in cities such as Allentown, Reading, Wilkes-Barre, Scranton and Lancaster, while suburban motor hotels continue to prosper.

Further, it is typical for hotels to

serve the commercial market on weekdays and tourists on the weekends and over the summer. In our region, most commercial activity takes place in the suburbs, and the primary tourist attractions (such as the Amish, Dutch Wonderland and the Rockvale Square outlet stores) are miles from center city.

Also, downtown Lancaster is isolated from major traffic arteries, and thus downtown is not a suitable overnight spot for transients. Historically, downtown Lancaster hotel occupancy rates have been very low and the average room price modest.

Recently purchased for a tiny fraction of reproduction cost, the Brun-

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# City: Downtown options

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wick is being upgraded and will better serve downtown.

After decades of experience in developing and managing commercial real estate, including five hotels (none local), my sense is that, given the proliferation of convention centers and downtown Lancaster's lack of comparative advantages, the proposed convention center may not prove viable.

At best, the conference center is unlikely to generate nearly enough added room nights to support both the renovated 220-room Brunswick and the proposed, costly 300-room Marriott.

## Alternative projects

Is the downtown situation so unpromising that we need to do "something," no matter how great the subsidy, how much is put at risk and how questionable the prospects for success?

Fortunately, this is not the case. We already have several institutions that have proven to be very successful and need only a moderate amount of community support to enable them to grow to their full potential.

●The Lancaster Public Library on Duke Street, though it has not been enlarged or renovated for decades, nonetheless attracts some thousand persons a day despite being closed most evenings and on Sundays. Other cities take great pride in a new or renovated library, which serves as a cultural center and benefits all generations and the entire community. (The expanded and fully renovated Martin Library in York holds its grand reopening in October.)

A modernized and properly funded library would draw hundreds of patrons during evenings and Sunday afternoons and would encourage the location of professional offices downtown.

●The Pennsylvania Academy of Music ([www.PAAcademyMusic.com](http://www.PAAcademyMusic.com))

was formed to bring to southcentral Pennsylvania the opportunity to pursue an accredited superior musical education. It has attracted distinguished faculty from New York, Baltimore and elsewhere and students from outside this region and even from abroad.

PAM could be developed into a private high school for musicians along the lines of Juilliard in New York and Curtis in Philadelphia. PAM's growth would require more school facilities, dormitories and spur development of cafes, boutiques, shops and housing. Its concerts would attract many local and out of town visitors.

●Pennsylvania College of Art & Design ([www.pcad.edu](http://www.pcad.edu)) is an accredited professional art college offering bachelor's degree programs in fine art, graphic design, illustration and photography. Its expansion would further contribute to a downtown campus and cultural atmosphere.

●Bethel Harambee performs "Living the Experience" at Bethel AME Church. This dinner show already draws busloads of tourists of all races and creeds ([www.LivingTheUndergroundRailroad.com](http://www.LivingTheUndergroundRailroad.com)). Its "ChurchTowne Rediscovered" project envisions a 600-seat auditorium for performances of this and other African-American cultural and historical presentations and use by other groups. Development would bring tourist business downtown and help revitalize the neighborhood.

By embracing and supporting these and other viable projects, we can avoid the white elephants of the past and create a vibrant downtown where companies will compete for prime sites and not require immense grants from government, generous tax abatements and risky city guarantees.

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