



# Germantown Chronicle

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## Students Present Ideas on How to Revive Town Hall

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Staff Writer

As part of its ongoing quest to spur a community-oriented renovation of the shuttered Germantown Town Hall at 5928 Germantown Avenue, the Liberation Fellowship Community Development Corporation hosted a forum for ideas December 8. It was something Germantown residents have not seen since the building closed in the early 1990s.

According to Nancy-Ellen Churchville, the organization's president, creating intellectual and emotional investment in the building, which is owned by the City of Philadelphia, is the first step to overcoming skepticism about developing it.

"The temperature is, 'how you gonna do it? I don't see how you're going to do it,'" she said. "More than money, energy - positive energy - is necessary. Money will come."

To that end, Liberation Fellowship invited a master's class from the Philadelphia University School of Architecture's Sustainable Design Program to present their ideas about Town Hall in a poster session at Vernon House, in Vernon Park, last Tuesday, December 8.

"The idea is that the students are doing the work," said Professor Rob Fryer. "To do all the background work, so that when [developers] go to do this project they will have all this information to build off."

Students looked at the building's history, its assets and challenges

for green design, possible changes to the site plan surrounding the building, likely uses for the interior space, likely community needs for the space, and code upgrades. They presented their findings in a series of posters, which local residents browsed and commented on.

"My approach was to see what was [already] in Germantown," said student Nicole Jui.

She made a map of all the business types in the Germantown and Cheltenham Avenue area, and considered using the Town Hall as a business incubator aimed at growing a more diversified business base for Germantown. She noticed a high concentration of certain types of business in the area such as beauty-oriented uses, and a relatively low concentration of other businesses such as fresh, healthy foods.

Jui's architectural rendering depicted storefronts on the ground level of Town Hall facing Haines Street, which has a wide visual sweep from Germantown Avenue. This might be an ideal space for an outdoor café, she suggested, and the large paved area in front of the rotunda could be a farmer's market.

Bethany Shiner and Jill Guinther took an overall look at the building and the site possibilities. Recognizing that things might have to change dramatically around Town Hall to achieve what the community wants, they took some liberties. They eliminated the now closed building next door at 5932-42 Germantown and built a large green space surrounding Town Hall, which would help with storm water management on the site and promote outdoor events, they

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# Philadelphia U. Students Present Ideas on How to Revive Town Hall



(Above left) Philadelphia University master's student Jill Guinther (left) points out features of her ideas for Town Hall to fellow student Bethany Shiner. In the rear, student Nicole Jui stands by her display. The rotunda at Town Hall (above right) has unexpected possibilities for future uses, students discovered.

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 said. And to help with parking, they suggested knocking down the vacant and roofless building on the other side of the 14<sup>th</sup> Police District and installing a new lot there, paved with porous pavement – also to help with storm water.

Shiner and Guinther also noted the need for numerous building code upgrades to Town Hall, such as adding an elevator and fire stairway, possibly in a rear addition to the building.

Leah Brown and Ashley Johnson looked at internal uses for the building based on a wish list provided by Liberation Fellowship

CDC. They found that space constraints will force some tough choices.

“When we really started examining the spaces we realized there was no way [the suggestions] all were going to fit,” Johnson said.

So they came up with three floor plans that could be intermixed. All three versions have a combination of public and private uses, like police functions or the offices of elected officials along with private businesses.

“I think that’s how it would be most successful,” Johnson said.

In all three versions Brown and Johnson suggested using the top floor for a “co-working” space.

Drawing on the business incubator idea, this would be a space where a number of small start-up businesses could rent office space in non-traditional leases, and share office equipment to save money until they became established enough to move into their own dedicated offices.

As they were researching Town Hall this pair seemed to gain some insight to why Germantowners are so attached to the building. “In this building there’s all these great little opportunities,” Brown said.

One was in the rotunda that dominates the front of the building and houses World War I memorial plaques. No matter how the building is developed, that portion of it must remain open to the community. But Brown and Johnson discovered that, by removing two partitions in the rotunda area that are used to house huge antique radiators, a wide outer ring could be opened up to community use for things like public art displays.

Another opportunity is the huge three-pane transom windows that allow light and air to spill from the offices into the extra-wide central hallway inside the building. This is a green feature of the building because it can increase lighting and cooling efficiency, Brown said.

Community members talked with the students about Town Hall and some left their suggestions on Post-It notes stuck to their displays. “Farmers Market,” “Arts Festival” and “Greenhouse please” were among the suggestions.

“All this stuff makes a whole lot of sense,” said Reverend LeRoi Simmons, director of the Central Germantown Council, as he looked over the posters. “Everybody wants the police sta-

tion to be in there. We’ve got a state rep and City Council person who could be in there, but nobody wants to spend any money.”

According to Liberation Fellowship CEO John Churchville, that is the next step. In addition to more student architectural presentations, Liberation Fellowship CDC will begin working with business students to develop a financial plan for identifying possible money sources to bring Town Hall back to life.

## ‘A Hero’s Welcome’

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“I am very proud of my son. He is very tenacious. He never gives up. He stays with something until he reaches his goal. He is a very determined young man. You always see stories about when the whole unit returns. It is rare to see a story about an individual soldier returning home.”

“My husband and I were so overwhelmed to have all these people welcoming him home,” Sheila Booker said. “We were impressed with the men and women of Warriors Watch and A Hero’s Welcome. Their commitment transcends all economical, racial and political lines. They

tion that honored soldiers by attending their funerals.

“I recognized a wider need to support returning soldiers and their families,” Lutz said. “The best way I believe we can honor the dead is by supporting our men and women in the military.”

“It’s addictive,” said Lutz, describing seeing families welcoming their sons and daughters home from war. Lutz refers to the soldiers as “Our Heroes.”

Charlie Becker, coordinator of A Hero’s Welcome and also a Vietnam veteran, recalled how in the summer of 1969 a saleswoman refused to wait on him when he tried to buy some t-shirts. His buddy, he said, was returning