A Plan for the Future of the Harrisburg State Hospital

Provided by the Committee for the Future of Harrisburg State Hospital

July 2014

Photos by Philip Thomas, used from "City on the Hill" website: http://hsh.thomas-industriesinc.com/
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Recommendations and an offer of community and stakeholder input
Provided by the Committee for the Future of Harrisburg State Hospital

On July 2, 2014 Governor Tom Corbett signed Act 100 authorizing the Department of General Services (DGS) to survey the grounds of the Harrisburg State Hospital and present a plan for conveyance of the property to both houses of the General Assembly for approval. The Committee for the Future of Harrisburg State Hospital recommends that DGS, in surveying and subdividing the site, be guided by the following map of the conservation, recreational and historic values of the state hospital grounds.

This is a once in a Lifetime Opportunity. The Harrisburg State Hospital has been publicly owned for more than 150 years. The committee has created a map that shows the conservation and development opportunities on the property and the core area of historic buildings and landscape.

These resources include:

Greenbelt/Asylum Run Conservation Area
This parcel includes:
- The Capital Area Greenbelt, a bicycle and pedestrian trail that has been reclaimed by hundreds of volunteers for the benefit of thousands of citizens from near and far;
- The wooded steep slopes and the grassy flood plains which protect the water quality of Asylum Run, Paxton Creek and the Susquehanna River; and
- A recreational field that serves thousands of the region’s residents.

Historic Building Concentration Area
This is the core of the historic state hospital campus, a landmark in social history and a collection of distinctive architectural masterpieces, which offers attractive Federal tax credits for appropriate historic preservation and adaptive reuse (possible institutional use, market-rate residential, mixed use, etc.). The historic area also boasts an arboretum of outstanding “heritage” trees.

The Committee for the Future of Harrisburg State Hospital (CFHSH) includes representatives of Historic Harrisburg Association, Capital Area Greenbelt Association, City Beautiful 2.0, Living Landscape Observer, Bicycle South Central PA and numerous other stakeholder groups. We are committed to working closely with the General Assembly, interested state agencies and affected local governments. The community recognizes the need to repurpose the property, but we assert that this can be done in a way that offers an opportunity to take advantage of the multiple values on the site for today and for future generations.

For more information please contact:
Brenda Barrett, vice chair, CFHSH
717.574.0736
brendabarrett88@gmail.com

David J. Morrison, chair, CFHSH
717.233.4646
director@historicharrisburg.com
Aerial photograph of the state hospital grounds from 1930.
From Pennsylvania State Archives, reproduced by Philip Thomas.
Originally called the “City on the Hill” and listed in the National Register of Historic Places as a historic district, the Harrisburg State Hospital was the first in Pennsylvania, and one of the first in the United States, to be built for the care and treatment of the mentally ill.

By the 1840’s, it became clearer that the nation’s “poor houses” and jails were not conducive to giving proper attention to those with emotional and mental disturbances. Social reformer Dorothea Dix (1802-1887) convinced the Pennsylvania state legislature to authorize the establishment of an institution just for the psychologically disabled. Consequently, the Harrisburg Lunatic Asylum, the hospital’s original official name, was founded by Act of the Pennsylvania General Assembly in 1845.

The hospital would grow from its original 130 acres to over 1,000, and includes 30 buildings, the earliest dating to 1851, that contribute to the historic significance of the hospital grounds.

The campus retains its original topography and park-like setting, a place of profound beauty including the Patton Arboretum and playing fields along Cameron Street. It reinforces the Hospital’s historic significance as a place meant to uplift the spirits of those who lived and worked there.

Of particular note is Asylum Run which gently flows through the campus’s Asylum Run Valley traversed by the Capital Area Greenbelt. This portion of the Greenbelt evolved from the original park and parkway plan to encircle the city designed by nationally-recognized landscape architect Warren Manning as part of the Harrisburg’s City Beautiful Movement of the early 20th Century. Any reassignment of the property should acknowledge the Greenbelt’s existing easement agreement as well as public access to enjoy the grounds and scenic drives.

When the sale of the State Hospital is pursued efforts should be made to respect the character of the campus, as well as maintaining the Capital Area Greenbelt parkway along Asylum Run. Further, the National Register Historic District offers developers the opportunity to take advantage of the federal 20% rehabilitation investment tax credits to adapt these historically and architecturally significant buildings for new uses.

Seeking a buyer who has experience with these tax incentives will avoid the huge financial and environmental costs of demolishing these buildings, and instead encourage private investors to preserve the hospital campus and expand the local tax base, much as was done with the Philadelphia Navy Yard, which stands today as a national model of historic preservation and economic development.

Jeb Stuart, Member, Committee for the Future of the Harrisburg State Hospital
The Capital Area Greenbelt is a 20 mile “emerald necklace” of trails connecting parks and institutions in five municipalities in the Harrisburg area.

Envisioned and constructed over 100 years ago during an era of civic improvement, the Greenbelt’s relevance today is to provide an alternative form of transportation, opportunities for exercise, and a cohesive community. In recent years over two million dollars and countless volunteer hours have been invested in the Greenbelt. Currently there are about three millions dollars in improvements and expansion projects pending.

The section of the Greenbelt on the former State Hospital grounds provides one of the premier respite on the trail between more urban areas. Nestled in a unique valley containing the Patton Arboretum and Asylum Run, the Greenbelt runs along unbuildable steep slopes and flood-prone parklands. This oasis of green is a quiet habitat for flora and fauna and is situated amazingly close to the urban intersection of Cameron Street and State Route 22.

Every effort should be made to preserve this key link of a very important regional and historical asset.

Carl A. Dickson, Director
Dauphin County Parks and Recreation Department
The Patton Arboretum is named after Rufus Patton who worked as a farm manager at the hospital for 37 years. He was well known for his admirable concern for the trees here when he retired around 1975. At the turn of the 20th century, the State Department of Forestry furnished 6,000 seedlings for planting along the hillsides and streams at the hospital, and in 1920 also provided many of the trees around the buildings. Edward Green, Superintendent of the hospital at the time, believed that a nursery would offer the patients recreational activity and that the pleasant landscape could even hasten patient recovery.

In 1960 R. Bruce Dunlap, a Department of Forestry volunteer who was recognized for his care of the trees, attached metal identification tags to many of the trees. Unfortunately, maintenance dwindled and most of the labels fell off or were vandalized. The trees at the hospital have often been a way to bring the hospital community together.

On several Arbor Days in the 1970s the staff planted trees along Azalea Drive. When Assistant Superintendent John H. Mentzer died in 1971 employees donated money to plant 150 Japanese cherry trees in his memory. These trees, from the nursery of Rufus Patton’s brother, replaced the one that had been planted in the 1930s by the Civilian Conservation Corps. The CCC was also responsible for building the beautiful stone staircase nicknamed the “Million Dollar Stairs,” which lead from the Natural Area up the wooded hillside to the Administration Building.

In 1998 Rebecca Gloss, a summer intern from the State Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, developed and named the arboretum. She located and identified 68 exotic and native trees and attached plastic identification signs with English and Latin names on each one. She also developed a map showing the location of each of those trees and the location of each building at the State Hospital grounds.

The trees at the Harrisburg State Hospital are an invaluable asset that should not be overlooked or taken for granted. Hopefully the contribution that the trees in the Patton Arboretum have made to the well-being of the patients over those many years shall not be overlooked or taken for granted.

Norman Lacasse, Capital Area Greenbelt

Paul Zeph, Audubon Pennsylvania