



Ken Doyno | Your Big Idea: Complete Pittsburgh's 'central park'

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Insight

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Building on the “Big Idea” series of editorials, we are publishing a series of “Your Big Idea” from Pittsburghers with their own ambitious plans for the city and region.

Our river-carved regional landscape — where the outside of river bends formed steep hillsides and the inside formed flat plateaus — shaped how our neighborhoods developed. As industry proliferated on river plateaus, main streets emerged along the paths between home and work, often along plateaus, through valleys and along ridgelines. These main streets became centers of commerce, civic life and eventually daily commutes.

No two factors are more important to understanding our region’s past and future than the continuous connection of our main streets and the celebration of our distinct topographies.

To unlock our region’s full potential, we must apply our understanding to the steep hillsides and tight shorelines which also need connected, continuous main streets that align and connect our neighborhoods, especially on the third, generally south side of “Three Rivers Park” and the two bridges that lead to this side of our triangular heart.

Connecting the heart of our region in every direction is essential to serving all the people of Pittsburgh and our region.

Separated neighborhoods

At the height of our industrial growth, our neighborhoods were separated by rail lines along rivers, factories on plateau shores and roads and bridges focused on moving trucks and cars, often excluding the greater need to connect people and places.

More than half a century ago, we began to reverse these industrial separations by cleaning waterways, improving air, preserving historic main streets and making our rivers the place to be.

Over 50 years ago, the seeds of “Three Rivers Park” were planted at the center of our region with the creation of Point State Park and the Cultural District. Building on the 1993 creation of the Regional Asset District, the North Shore and many of our region’s greatest destinations were given a life line to create an active modern central Pittsburgh with a river in the middle, between the two plateaus of Downtown and the North Shore.

Over the past 25 years, Riverlife, a nonprofit formed to help create a community vision for our downtown riverfronts, has expanded this vision by imagining the entire confluence of our Three Rivers as our connected “Central Park.”

Up to now, much of this “Central Park” has advanced where the landform was easiest — the flat plateaus and former industrial sites with few obstacles and fewer hillsides. The revitalization of places like Lawrenceville, the Strip District and East Liberty showed us plateaus with restored main streets surrounded by homes made for great places to live, meet, shop, dine and build community.

The third side

Nowhere is this “disconnect” more essential to overcome than where we need to connect and complete the “third side” at the center of Three Rivers Park. This challenge spans from the South Side from under the Liberty Bridge, to the West End where Saw Mill Run meets the Ohio River, to across the Ohio River, and includes how we cross the Ohio and Monongahela rivers.

Station Square, just purchased by Boston-based WS Development, has a short-but-mighty main street, historic buildings, housing, a hotel and great transit. Yet its friendly and safe central street cannot reach its potential when stuck between two dead ends that disconnect it from the south and west as well as from Three Rivers Park.

That mini main street deserves to be part of a continuously great experience street from Bingham Street in the South Side to S. Main Street in the West End.

Connecting the Grand Concourse in the old Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad terminal to the Gateway Clipper and Highmark Field (no one likes to walk through parking lots) will be easy. But creating a mixed-use development that continues a quality walkable road experience under the iconic Fort Pitt Bridge to the presently orphaned Duquesne incline will be far more difficult.

We must commit to a stunning, visibly connected route around the three central bridges that surround the Point and the Confluence, creating a complete path around the center of our region. We need to modify the Fort Pitt and West End bridges to support gracious pedestrian trail extensions off their sides, similar to the one on the Fort Duquesne Bridge.

This fantastic trail connecting Point State Park to the North Shore cannot be a one-off. Figuring out how to engineer this uniquely Pittsburgh path to go all the way around the entire confluence is the only way to truly complete our region's center.

The skinny southwest plateau

Perhaps the easier challenge to tackle is the massive Gateway View Plaza. This ten-acre site along the foot of Mount Washington hosts a massive building just slightly longer than the Terminal building in the Strip District.

Like that building ten years ago, Gateway View desperately needs to be reimagined and must include the continuation of the slow-moving, active main street through or over the aircraft carrier-size structure.

The raised parking deck that currently looks out over the confluence could reasonably become part of a great outdoor park and trail route with sweeping views activated by accommodating many floors of housing opening right out to it. From this perch, access platforms can bridge over the railroad to the river below.

From that site to the West End, Riverside Street, the lower stretch of Carson Street, the ongoing Alcosan collector project can all be part of unburying Saw Mill Run. That will connect S. Main Street to the river and this slower road network while the West End Circle continues to host major state roads. Then the West End Bridge, with a true pedestrian counterpart, can become a real path extension to the North Shore and the Esplanade development (and its Ferris wheel) that just broke ground.

A transformative vision in this location will demand more investment in infrastructure, but we desperately need roads that are more than the accumulation of highways that have made up the West End Circle for the last 75 years.

By removing the dam that the railroads built across the West End gap more than 100 years ago, the West End Valley can finally be rid of its flood plain

status and welcome redevelopment as true main streets, great places and future nature trails connect the surrounding neighborhoods to the rivers through the only gap along the massive face of Mount Washington.

Our stunning Mount Washington

Viewed from the Point or any of our bridges, the 3-mile, 500-foot high hillside of Mount Washington is the defining geographic feature of our region, second only to the Three Rivers themselves. This massive green wall frames the confluence, creating a stunning visual anchor for our city.

Completing the loop and activating the base of that hillside with positive, connected, continuous main-street activity, with two inclines and the singular West End gap, can unify the center of our region with the natural interconnections of our Emerald Necklace parks.

Only by committing to a higher purpose at our region's core can we move from a fragmented to a connected region, from isolated to integrated neighborhoods, and seamlessly from flat to steep, and urban to natural environments. We owe this to our city's future.

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