

Coatesville must solve crime woes

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Gov. Rendell and others have stepped forward to help Coatesville deal with the devastating arsons that have left so many homeless or terrified to go to sleep at night. We have found that many are eager to help Coatesville return to its previous vibrancy, or are already struggling to do so. But their efforts are fractured, underfunded, and often only temporary.

For Coatesville to realize its potential as an affordable, diverse, walkable, well-located community in one of the commonwealth's most livable counties, there must be leadership and unity behind a viable, long-term, well-funded plan for development. And we must address the crime problem, which hampers progress on all other fronts.

Experience tells us that, when we come together with a well-thought-out plan of action supported by the community, it can succeed. When our foundation came forward less than five years ago with plans to build the Brandywine Center, a health and housing center in the heart of Coatesville, we got the unanimous support of elected officials and charitable contributions from a variety of sources. Without such broad support, we could not have built the city's first major development in more than three decades.

Many young people feel they have no future in Coatesville, and yet their pride in their community is a great asset. They want opportunities to succeed and be proud of their city again.

The William Penn Founda-

tion, steelmaker ArcelorMittal, and the United Way of Chester County supported a year-long study of the challenges facing young people in the Coatesville Area School District. The result will support a network of agencies and institutions serving them, helping Coatesville's youths become healthy, productive members of society.

There are also significant economic-development projects on the drawing board, including a hotel, apartment buildings and retail along the Brandywine Creek. These, too, can succeed.

But these efforts depend on dealing with the city's most significant problem: crime. Largely due to drug activity, Coatesville's crime rate is higher than that of any other community in Chester County. That leads to the belief that it's not safe to live or work in Coatesville.

The sense of a lack of law enforcement has contributed to the rash of arsons that have put families out of their homes and led others — who have nothing to do with drugs or illegal activities — to wonder if it's safe to stay.

Elected officials and the city administration must work with District Attorney Joe Carroll — who, admirably, has made it his personal mission to help Coatesville succeed — to rid the city of the drug trade and find the arsonists. We urge everyone to check ego at the door, put aside self-interest, forget past animosities and offenses, be open to new ideas, and commit to working together to address this problem and bring Coatesville back.

Let's view these fires as a wake-up call — an opportunity to create real, long-term change for Coatesville.

For more information, see www.brandywinefoundation.org.