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Ashland – Frackville – Girardville – Mahanoy City – Ringtown – Shenandoah

Good morning Senators. My name is John Guers. I am the Executive Director of Upper Schuylkill, Inc. I would like to thank Chairman Yaw and Vice Chairman Argall for the opportunity to provide testimony today.

Upper Schuylkill, Inc. is a Pennsylvania State Designated Regional Main Street Program, which is dedicated to promoting downtown revitalization in the municipalities of Ashland, Frackville, Girardville, Mahanoy City, Ringtown and Shenandoah. Regional coordination is essential in these small communities. If not for the regional approach, our smaller communities would never be able to attain the funding necessary to improve the quality of life of its residents. The Main Street funding by DCED and the leadership and guidance of the Pennsylvania Downtown Center has allowed Upper Schuylkill, Inc. to successfully organize downtown revitalization programs and multi-municipal partnerships.

The Upper Schuylkill Regional Revitalization Vision Statement explains Upper Schuylkill as a collection of communities that have the interest and capacity to band together as a larger regional economic community. The communities see the value and possibilities of working together on a regional scale. This progressive outlook will be the catalyst for this vision to become the region's future. *"One Regional City... Six Great Towns"*

Upper Schuylkill, Inc. serves a population of approximately 39,000 within the northern region of Schuylkill County. Since the collapse of the anthracite coal industry over 50 years ago, these small municipalities have been faced with out-migration of residents, particularly their best and brightest young people. They have also endured an aging population, high unemployment, low median income, loss of small business, declining tax base, low real estate values, vacant store fronts and the deterioration of their once vibrant buildings.

The results of all the factors listed above led to our once proud downtowns steady decline into blight. We are fighting blight by investing in physical improvements. Upper Schuylkill's façade improvement program has seen \$200,000 in exterior improvements that have been matched and in many cases exceeded by the property owner. The restoration of many downtown buildings to their original style has greatly improved the aesthetic appeal of our towns and has boosted town pride and volunteerism.

The borough governments have actively pursued state funding for streetscape improvements. The sidewalk improvements along with the installation of period lighting, benches, the addition of trees and flower planters has made our towns much more attractive to shoppers and residents.

To further make our towns more pedestrian friendly, Upper Schuylkill established a Regional Pedestrian and Motorist Safety Program. Pedestrian channelizing devices, compliments of Penn DOT, have been placed in our downtown areas to slow traffic and ensure safety for downtown visitors, shoppers and residents.

A high impact safety improvement grant from Penn DOT awarded Upper Schuylkill communities pedestrian crosswalk painting, pedestrian crossing signs, parking space line painting, school zone markings, school zone blinking signs, traffic control box replacements and handicapped ramps.

In addition, the Upper Schuylkill Downtown Cleaning Program has purchased street cleaning equipment that is shared by the six municipalities. The cleaning plan includes sidewalk cleaning once a month throughout the six communities "Main Street" districts. The regional approach has made great strides at improving the appearance of the downtowns.

We have made noticeable improvements to our downtowns with the above mentioned programs, but there is much more work to be done. Many of our downtown buildings are outdated structures which need to be adapted to new uses. Many of the buildings second floors, that were at one time offices for doctors, attorneys, accountants etc., are not ADA compliant, leaving underutilized space. There are many structures that need to be demolished. Removing these eyesores is an improvement, but leaves the streets disjointed and has a negative affect on pedestrian use. The redevelopment of empty lots needs to be addressed.

Four of the six communities are zoned by the County of Schuylkill; the County is in the middle of a Zoning Rewrite. Upper Schuylkill, Inc. is participating and providing input into this process. Zoning issues addressed include non-conforming structures, set backs of new structures and parking considerations.

The downtown merchants need the support of our local residents; the large superstores have had a dramatic effect on our local commercial businesses. Lack of employment opportunities in the towns have cut down on the lunchtime spending. We have a regional marketing and promotions program to encourage our residents to buy locally and invite the public to our many excellent festivals and events. Upper Schuylkill is also working on a "wayfinding" signage program to help promote our tourism efforts.

Upper Schuylkill, Inc. has a business retention and recruitment program. We realize in these hard economic times retaining our current merchants is of primary importance. We offer our businesses that have been in business no less than five years up to \$1,000 in matching funds for the purchase of equipment. In an effort to attract businesses, a business can apply for up to \$1,000 of matching funds for advertising through newspapers, radio, billboards, etc. The advertising funds are available for both new and existing businesses.

The Upper Schuylkill Board of Directors consists of a representative of each of the six borough governments and a volunteer from each revitalization organization in each town. The shared services and multi-municipal, regional approach has the *Six Great Towns* on their way to becoming *One Regional City*.

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