

Pitcairn Community Renaissance Aims to Restore Town

by Jonathan Barnes

The small community of Pitcairn—east of Pittsburgh and undiscovered by many Pittsburghers—has the kind of small-town charm that officials of other towns wish they could recreate. Originally farmland, the borough was begun as a half-square-mile tract bought in 1894 by the Pennsylvania Railroad. It quickly became the hometown of many men who worked in the nearby rail yards, and their families, and the town prospered.

But things have changed. Now, while much of the town was comprised of family homes in previous decades, about half of the housing is rentals now. The town is struggling with problems other larger towns have been fighting for years, such as drug use, crime, and the need for safer streets. To fill what some citizens perceived as a void in leadership in the small community of about 4,000 people, Pitcairn Community Renaissance was formed two years ago.

The nonprofit group is aiming to make the community safer, and also to beautify various parts of the town. PCR has bought one house, and plans to buy several other houses and refurbish them for re-sale. The organization's members believe that Pitcairn has the potential to become a much more thriving community, where people are proud to live and work. The dedication of those members, though, already speaks loudly about their pride in their community.

Members of the PCR redevelopment group include Doug and Virginia Crothers; Karen Bova; Jim Rullo; local butcher Joe Pedulla; and local pharmacist Phil Arlia. Donis is secretary of the group, and works as a staffer in Pitcairn borough's government offices. The group was formed to help the struggling town, Doug Crothers said. "When we started this, Pitcairn was coming off of 28 years of the same local government... Council was ineffective on controlling the community and in moving it forward. Council was a favoritism-run organization," he said.

PCR hopes to change that antiquated way of doing things in the borough, and much more. Pitcairn Community Renaissance is meant to inspire people of the community, to help build community spirit, Crothers said, adding that members of the group have worked recently with Pitcairn Council on a comprehensive plan for the borough.

The inspiration will no doubt grow as the group's efforts bear fruit. PCR's beautification program already is transforming a vacant triangle-shaped lot at Wall and Wood streets. The property will soon have a garden, with flowers, retaining walls and a water feature. "Wall Avenue is our second most heavily traveled street," Crothers noted.

A house next to the lot will be refurbished, though the group initially intended to demolish it. PCR members learned that the house was the original quarters of the servant of the town's blacksmith, and the historical value of the place shot through the roof. Now, the small house could be a new destination point in town—the Pennsylvania Historical Society would like to use the first floor off the house as an exhibition hall, and the second floor



could become the home of Pitcairn Community Renaissance. The town's historic flair could be a saleable thing.

The borough is lucky, since it is graced with quaint Victorian architecture, and easy-going small-town neighborliness among its residents. The community also has its own cable/internet provider in Pitcairn Cable, and its own electric distribution service. Those assets could be sold in the future, while they are still worth money, Crothers said.

Residents and businesspeople in the town have thrown their support behind PCR's plans. The group hopes to beautify Broadway, Wall and Center avenues in the borough. The improvements, both planned and achieved, coupled with a more proactive approach on the streets by Pitcairn Police, already have had an effect on the feeling of security in the borough, Doug Crothers said. "Under Chief Dave Palermo, we've probably cut the crime rate by 40 percent," he said.

The dreams of creating a more beautiful, safer, thriving Pitcairn will take the help of a variety of residents, Crothers said. Pitcairn Community Renaissance could use a lawyer and an accountant on their board, Crothers said. The group also needs financial help. Currently it has two major fundraisers: its Burger Blasts sell hamburgers at Third and Wall avenues in the borough about once a month; and the group also hosts a monthly raffle.

Judy Donis said she's involved with the nonprofit group because she wants to see the community thriving, as it was when she settled there with her husband 40 years ago. "I've been here 40 years. I'm hoping to be here another 40 years," she said. Past problems with crime, unruly teens on the street, and other nuisances had a bad effect on the borough, Donis said. But now, things could be different, since Pitcairn is poised to capitalize on its strengths, even while recognizing its weaknesses, she said. "We have some empty storefronts, and we could use more businesses. It's a lot cheaper to have a business on Broadway than in Monroeville," Donis said. "We just want to make the community look better."

The spirit already is catching, with a revitalized business owner's group actively changing the town's look. The group recently put decorative flower baskets on the streets, to spruce up the place. About \$20,000 in improvements also are planned for Wall Avenue.

Members of PCR are working with the business owner's group, and actually baked cookies to donate for sale to benefit the flower basket project. So it seems that though Pitcairn might lack name recognition, its people make up for it with their heart. "We're a little town, and no one knows we're here. But Pitcairn is a great place," Donis said.

For more information on Pitcairn Community Renaissance or to donate to the group, call Doug Crothers at 412.613.9374, or email him at doug@pitcairncable.com.