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Developer Uses Federal, State HTCs to Finance Rehabilitation of Train Station in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania

NICK DECICCO, SENIOR WRITER, NOVOGRADAC

For more than a half-century, efforts to revive the train station in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania, went down a familiar track.

Countless ideas arrived and departed: An antiques dealer sought to renovate it. A center for the arts was proposed. A post office. Restaurants. Two former Pittsburgh Steelers considered it as a health club in 1985.

Even before Tracey Evans came to restore the Wilkinsburg Train Station as executive director of the Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation (WCDC), she urged the community to act. The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette published a letter to the editor she penned in 2001 when she was a resident encouraging the community to save the building.

Image: Courtesy of Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation
The front of the restored Wilkinsburg Train Station in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania, is seen earlier this year. The station shuttered in the 1960s and fell into disrepair until the recent restoration.



Image: Courtesy of Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation
A look at the Wilkinsburg Train Station in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania, in 1916. Amtrak service to the station ended in 1975, when it was abandoned until its recent restoration.

Evans forgot about the letter until she started working to restore the station in recent years, which the WCDC did with a slate of financing sources, including historic tax credits (HTCs).

Now it's full steam ahead for the Wilkesburg Train Station, which held a ribbon-cutting Sept. 24 to celebrate the completion of a four-year restoration.

"It's such a work of art, truly a historic preservation project," said Evans.



Image: Courtesy of Wilkesburg Community Development Corporation
A 2018 aerial view shows the roof of the Wilkesburg Train Station in Wilkesburg, Pennsylvania, during construction. The dilapidated roof, portions of which can still be seen here, required extensive repair.

Hear the Train A-Comin'

The Beaux-Arts style anchor building was built in 1915 and opened in June 1916 with a ceremony as many as 100,000 people attended. The building replaced two previous train stations. The first, built in 1854, burned down in 1883. The next stood from 1884 to 1914, but the tracks were deemed too dangerous to the citizens of Wilkesburg, so the third and current iteration was constructed.

The structure was a \$3 million improvement in its day, which is equivalent to \$75 million today. Evans said the station is larger than others in other boroughs neighboring Pittsburgh.

However, by 1975, Amtrak brought a halt to service to the borough, ending the station's tenure, beginning nearly a half-century of slow degradation and the aforementioned cycle of enthusiastic initiatives petering out as they hit hurdles.

The building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1985 and, in the years after, signs of disrepair began to accumulate—vines grew across the clock in its façade. Graffiti covered its walls. Portions of the roof began to crumble and collapse, with chunks of sky visible from inside the old station's walls.

"It had gotten into very bad disrepair until we started our project," Evans said.

After decades of stalled efforts, Evans and WCDC were the ones to get the rehabilitation train chugging. WCDC came into existence in 2008 and became part of Wilkesburg's Main Street Program in 2010, which allowed the organization to receive bigger grants.

Beginning in 2015, the community made a reinvigorated push to revitalize the train station. That year, WCDC got a \$1 million grant from the Richard King Mellon Foundation, which helps with redevelopments in southwestern Pennsylvania. Later, WCDC amassed approximately \$175,000 in individual donations from around the nation.

Making Connections

When asked what the hardest part of restoring the Wilkesburg Train Station was, Evans laughed.

"Every single thing about the project," Evans said. "People who have been doing this kind of work for decades have said this isn't the biggest or the most expensive, but was certainly the most complex in terms of funding sources."

Evans worked with four different historic consultants during different aspects of the process just to secure HTCs.

As Evans and WCDC worked to secure financing, the structure continued to deteriorate.



Image: Courtesy of Wilkesburg Community Development Corporation
A view toward the front doors of the Wilkesburg Train Station in Pennsylvania prior to its restoration in the late 2010s.

“The whole interior of the lobby is marble,” Evans said. “Pieces were falling and cracking on a daily basis. We would come in daily and there would be something else on the ground.”

At times, Evans said, with the roof in poor shape, it wasn’t uncommon to see water pooling on the lobby floor. Despite that, Evans said the bulk of the floor was salvageable, speaking to the quality of the craftsmanship by laborers more than a century ago.

“There were a lot more structural repairs that had to be done than we thought,” Evans said. “It was much farther deteriorated than we expected.”



Image: Courtesy of Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation
Workers restore the marble in the interior of the Wilkinsburg Train Station in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania, in the late 2010s. Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation, which restored the train station, used marble from the same place in Italy as the building’s initial developers in the 1910s.

Construction began in 2017. The building includes a skylight, patterned terrazzo and mosaic tile floors, polished stone pilasters and panels as well as the clock.

Among its most distinct features is the marble, which complicated restoration. Evans said three kinds of marble were used, approximately half of which needed to be shipped from the same place in Italy where it was first sourced more than a century ago. The marble restoration alone took one year, Evans said.

Deep attention was paid to match the modern structure to its historic counterpart, including such efforts as analyzing paint chips to match colors.

In 2019, the WCDC moved its operations into an adjacent building that also was restored, the neighboring Lohr Building. Evans said the bulk of the train station restoration was completed before the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Image: Courtesy of Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation
A look at the front of the Wilkinsburg Train Station from Ross Avenue during its restoration in the late 2010s in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania. The station held a reopening ceremony in September.

Financing

Part of the task for Evans and WCDC was pulling together funding from more than a dozen sources for the restoration, which exceeded WCDC estimates as a nearly \$7.5 million endeavor. The restoration was Evans’ first experience in real estate.

In addition to the Richard King Mellon Foundation grant, the Allegheny Foundation, Hillman Foundation, University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, Wilkinsburg High School Alumni, Pennsylvania Historic & Museum Committee, FNB Corporation, PNC Bank, Wilkinsburg Historical Society, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the governor’s office, the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development and the Redevelopment Authority of Allegheny County were among those also providing funding.

Evans and WCDC have worked toward using HTCs since the outset, receiving a \$1.4 million federal allocation and, in July, a state-level HTC award of \$300,000 from the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development.

TriState Capital Bank, a Pittsburgh-based entity, invested in the federal tax credits and also provided a \$3.1 million bridge loan. Bill Schenck, vice chair and

co-founder of TriState Capital Bank, said his firm was pleased to play a role in the restoration.



Image: Courtesy of Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation
Visitors explore the newly renovated Wilkinsburg Train Station earlier this year in Wilkinsburg, Pennsylvania.

“The train station has come back to life and it is symbolic of the positive change happening in Wilkinsburg,” Schenck said. “We at TriState Capital Bank are thrilled to have had the opportunity to be part of this outstanding community effort.”

As of early September, WCDC was seeking an investor for the state-level HTCs.

The WCDC is in the process of seeking tenants for the restored train station, hoping a restaurant arrives on the main level. The corporation brought Neighborhood Partnership Program in Pennsylvania in as a partner to handle operating expenses.

“It’s a great gathering spot for the community here in Wilkinsburg,” Evans said. “It’s close to neighborhoods. We’ve seen a lot of growth recently. It’s a great location to get people into Wilkinsburg who might not have been here before.” ❖

WILKINSBURG TRAIN STATION

FINANCING

- ◆ \$3.1 million bridge loan from TriState Capital Bank
- ◆ \$1.4 million in federal historic tax credit (HTC) equity from TriState Capital Bank
- ◆ \$1.25 million grant from Richard King Mellon Foundation
- ◆ \$750,000 gap loan from Bridgeway Capital
- ◆ \$300,000 state HTC allocation from the Pennsylvania Department of Community and Economic Development
- ◆ \$175,000 in individual donations

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