

## Small Talk: Rock festival pounds home arts success

By Bill Rettew Jr. 05/04/2005

It was a pounding in the background, and probably not noticeable anywhere else except next door inside the Colonial Theatre, and here in the offices of The Phoenix.

It sounded like someone was moving furniture, or even pounding the walls.

Eleven progressive rock performers from all over the world had taken refuge in that old vaudeville theatre for the weekend, and the bass lines and drum beats could be heard and felt through our common wall.

Those sounds were certainly welcome and a sign of good things to come for Phoenixville.

Almost 500 music lovers filled the downtown to attend the event. Frank's Italian Delite stayed open late to handle the extra business and downtown restaurants received a noticeable jump in diners.

Main Street-CDC director Barry Cassidy has been pushing for an arts and entertainment district on Bridge Street since soon after he got his feet wet here in December of 2003. He has talked and dreamed often of much music and dining: Oh, what a pleasure it would be to take a walk down Bridge Street and see all sorts of visitors and residents imbibing and munching at sidewalk tables with those little umbrellas in their drinks.

At last week's borough council meeting, much conversation centered on the \$4.5 million streetscapes project, and what is quickly becoming a full-fledged arts and entertainment district. Those two subjects are certainly interrelated and Cassidy is the point man for both.

The CDC director spoke about the need for both bump-outs for sidewalk seating and brick sidewalks.

Many of those who at first were fully in favor of Cassidy's original plans have backed off. They talk about decreased parking on Bridge Street and the possible exclusion of non- arts and entertainment businesses.

Cassidy spoke with urgency of the need to get things done now - streetscapes improvements already agreed to - before another construction season is fully lost.

He said that the market will best determine what new businesses choose to call Phoenixville home, although he intends to seek arts and entertainment providers.

At stake are street and sidewalk improvements for Phase I of the project in the 100 block, where Iron Hill Brewery and Panini's are poised to seamlessly open for business. Both might open as early as November 2005.

West Chester has successfully revitalized what was a sagging downtown - and now Phoenixville is on the verge of doing the same - but maybe even doing it a little bit better. The county seat is home to more than 50 restaurants, which attract visitors from near and far.

We're already more than halfway there to realizing Cassidy's dreams.

Steel City Coffee House attracts national acts, and when those performers are interviewed, they say that they love the atmosphere of our coffee house and often refer to the Bridge Street Mecca as "a great listening room."

Steel City validates Cassidy's vision that Phoenixville can continue to attract performers from all over the world.

National acts have also been playing and continue to book at the 101-year-old Colonial.

Dave Magrogan of Kildare's is poised to set up shop at the Foundry, along with partners Tucker Reality and The Point, a Main Line Music venue. This project might also become a reality sometime this year with more music performers.

Blues and Elvis still loom large in Memphis, Tenn. Beale Street attracts visitors from all over the world. Spending a Saturday night in the Memphis downtown is a wonderful experience and a real treat. Music flows from at least 20 venues. A stroll down Beale Street allows the music lover to pick and choose. Doors are propped open and the Blues flows from within. Other restaurants and bars have speakers which vie for the passerby's attention. Not unlike First Friday celebrations in Phoenixville, Beale Street musicians set up shop in the street, and then pass the hat among large, appreciative crowds.

Cassidy fought for his baby at last week's council meeting. He called for a vote to affirm Bridge Street's transformation into an arts and entertainment district.

Council agreed to back up the visionary with a unanimous vote to proceed on the same path.

So sorry that everybody didn't have the chance to hear those ever-so-sweet sounds through the walls from the Colonial this past weekend.

Thanks to Cassidy, council and the work of many, those thuds will soon become even louder. Phoenixville is quickly becoming a playground!

Who would have thought five years ago that Bridge Street would become a destination? If you listen intently you can hear the sound of success getting louder every day.

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