

Project

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Six unidentified community participants

Government

Eloise Hirsh, Department of City Planning

History and Context Roundtable Discussion

McElwaine: This program is on the history and the long-term context of Nine Mile Run. We have had presentations by Ted Muller on the work of the Olmsteds in Pittsburgh, and by Joel Tarr on the history of the site. I also have been working on the history of the site. Do we have any particular questions or issues that anyone wants to bring up?

Benjamin: A matter of curiosity, does Duquesne Slag Company still exist, and is there any way to retroactively fine them for their crime?

McElwaine: Duquesne Slag Products Company was acquired in '85-'86 by Standard Lafarge Corporation of Cleveland, Ohio. All the assets of Duquesne Slag went to Standard Lafarge. The site has since been acquired by the City of Pittsburgh, in total. The city is the party responsible for the site. Were this a state or federal superfund site, past owners such as Standard Lafarge, would have to defend themselves against liability for the site. However, the state statute was revised very significantly about a year and a half ago. In terms of significant liability, my sense is that there would be very little unless this was declared a state superfund site. The likelihood of becoming a federal superfund site at this point is minimal because there have been no federal superfund sites for a number of years. Funding has been significantly reduced. Also, the level of the contamination on the site, in terms of just raw toxicity and particularly what the EPA looks for in the mobility of the toxins to leave the site, is low compared to similar superfund sites. There are only three superfund sites in all of Allegheny County: Neville Island, Mon Valley near Clairton which is a waste dump, and the third site is in the Alle-Kiski area up toward Tarentum that was an industrial dump site. The five county Philadelphia area, by contrast, has about 60 superfund sites. Our region has relatively few. Most

of the industries in the Philadelphia area processed their waste and disposed of them, while our industries volatilized their waste mainly by heating things to such an extent that they became airborne problems. Philadelphia never had to have their street lights on at noon like we did. So all our problems went into the air and theirs went into the groundwater. As a result, they have superfund sites and we don't. That's my guess anyway.

Tarr: One more point, even though there are only three superfund sites, there are many brownfield sites that have been impacted on industries and so on. That implies a significant amount of clean-up before they can utilize them.

Community Participant: It sounds like there is some federal responsibility to clean up a superfund site. What does being a "brownfield site" imply?

McElwaine: A brownfield site contains a level of contamination which is not significant enough to prompt EPA to intervene. It is a somewhat subjective criteria. When EPA intervenes, they will draw funds from the federal superfund and sue the responsible parties to refill the fund. In other words, EPA will intervene and spend it's own money to clean up a superfund site to the extent they have the resources to do so. They will sue those who are responsible to the extent that they can fine them to recover those funds and refill the superfund. With a brownfield site, such as the Homestead Works, there is an obligation in state statute for the owner of that site to insure that there is no public health risk from that site. However, recent statutes have left that in fairly broad interpretation. The Duquesne Works and the McKeesport Tube Sites are undergoing a \$22,000,000 clean-up. You're paying for that because the RIDC (the Allegheny County's Regional Industrial Development Corporation) owns that site.

Smith: Why, in 1922, was the site cheap enough that its best use was for a garbage dump? Farther up in Edgewood, the Rockwoods bought for an estate and, further up into Point Breeze, Frick bought for an estate. Did it have a big enough watershed and enough water and sewage that it wasn't really valuable property? I wonder why it was able to be purchased for a dump so cheaply?

Tarr: A lot of buying was surreptitious, in that, small pieces of parcels of property were picked up over time until they got 60,70, or so acres.

McElwaine: Ninety-four acres was the first purchase in the fall of 1922. They were able to acquire those sites, which were in an estate at that time, fairly cheap. There was some desire, and here I am speculating, on the part of the estate to sell. The land, which was right by the riverfront, did not have much road access, and did not have any real amenities. It was not a place you would build an estate.

Benjamin: In the Homestead Library, there is a 1900 engraving of the Homestead Hillside. You can see Second Avenue, the trolleys and the Browns Hill Road that went across the river there. It looks like there were trolley tracks across the Bridge. I guess there was a wagon road along the river.

Muller: This is highly speculative but, by the '20s, river site locations within the urban areas were, generally speaking, not ideal residential locations. People would look back on the watersheds. By then, our rivers were industrial, they were filled with coal barges and they were dirty. This is not where people were building nice homes.

Marino: When was Duck Hollow community developed?

Smith: It was in place in 1900; it was before the dumping.

McElwaine: There were some small tracts of houses in the valley at that time. In fact, Duquesne Slag in the '30s and '40s acquired some of those properties by sheriff's sale. In fact, there was a plat, although I don't think it was ever developed. This is according to the Chester Engineer's Phase I of the site; they found a plat for some more housing and it was for lower income, but it was never built.

Benjamin: I talked to a resident who lived there his entire life. He said that the Homestead Grays Baseball Stadium is buried beneath the slag. Do you know when the baseball stadium was buried beneath the slag?

Tarr: We figure it is there somewhere, but we really don't know. But we figure there was a practice field there somewhere. I don't think their main stadium was there.

Muller: They tended to play in Forbes Field on off-days.

Tarr: The question of access is a very interesting one and of where the trolley lines were. There were extensive lines but, the point that Ted made, those riverfront areas had changed and had become completely open sewers by that time. Take a look at Hazelwood, which had been a blue book living area in the middle to late nineteenth century, it entirely turned into mill worker housing. That happened from the mill on the Homestead side too.

Smith: There was less mill on the Homestead side. We think of it now as all mill but it wasn't always that way. Maybe there was no better use. I live by a stream drainage near Banksville, which is about 15 acres, it has a lot of water when you don't want it and it has a whole lot of sewage from Dormont. It is sort of hard to develop. The question of what one should do with a hollow, it is harder to think to figure out how to develop it.

Community Participant: There is the inverse question too, if not there then where (for the dumping)?

McElwaine: That's an excellent point and I wanted to address that. A research assistant for Joel, Megan Mosher, interviewed one of the surviving managers for Duquesne Slag. He managed the site for some 20 odd years. He noted that because that site was so close to the Jones & Laughlin Mills, Duquesne Slag got a very significant advantage in the cost and competition of slag disposal because the chief component of the cost was transportation. The material was worthless: the further you had to move it, the more expensive it got. So, even if Duquesne Slag had to pay an above market price for that site, it still would be made good in very short order because the barge and rail cost were so cheap compared to having to take it somewhere further away.

Muller: Was there an ownership overlap between Duquesne Slag and J&L?

McElwaine: There is nothing in the titles of the property. J&L never had any title or role in the titles to those properties. The total number of acquisitions Duquesne Slag bought over were probably 20 different parcels in the valley. They did it over a 40 year period, so that it was a very gradual process. But at no time did J&L ever enter into any of those direct purchases.

Muller: I wonder if there was much overlap in the board of directors of Duquesne Slag and J&L because that was such a common practice in the railroads and everything, directors made money at both ends.

McElwaine: It's an interesting question. There was competition for J&L's slag. For instance, there was a company named Allegheny Asphalt that also used the slag and competed for the slag and used it as bed and other material. In fact, they were sued in the late '40s and '50s by Hazelwood over some of their slag use activities. I need to research it more to see how it turned out. But there were competing uses and competing companies that J&L used to get rid of the slag. I need

to look over the corporate records of Duquesne Slag more carefully to see if there was a role there. I will say that when the Swisshelm Park Civic Association was trying to get the slag dump operations shut down in the '50s, the defense that the president of Duquesne Slag Products, R.L. Dercker, used was to say that it would severely damage J&L. However, J&L was not a witness and wasn't on the list of people who attended those hearings. He used the adverse impact on J&L as the reason to try and badger city council into not taking any action.

Muller: Of course at that very time, the city was trying to help J&L survive by buying up property in both the South Side and Hazelwood so they could modernize. You can see that's a fine defense.

Tarr: There's one counter intuitive thing that I haven't figured out yet. That is about why dump there rather than somewhere else. Well, it's cheaper, less transport cost. But isn't the real cost of transportation the loading and unloading? Isn't the basic cost of shipping on the riverfronts by the mile once you get it into the barge? It really ought to be small. That may have initiated that argument and I haven't worked that out yet.

McElwaine: Until 1950, rail was the primary means of moving slag. They shifted in 1950 to barge because the rail rates went through the roof. The rail transport by the mile was an issue. They actually pulled the rail lines for the most part out. Some were still there which was another source of contention for the community that surrounded it.

Smith: One time I saw a list of principals of Duquesne Slag and it occurs to me that I saw a familiar name or two but I don't know who was with J&L or anyone else I would have noticed. They were apparently major players in the Pittsburgh area. In terms of cost of shipping slag, if you can put it on a railroad then presumably you can put it on a lolly car take it on out and just dump it. Whereas, if you put the slag in a barge, what do you do with it next? You don't have good access to a strip mine or any other hole where you could float it in and turn it over.

McElwaine: They built a wharf there on the site in 1950. In fact, they started doing it without a permit. The Swisshelm Park Civic Association saw that happening and quickly notified the federal government that there was construction taking place in the waters of the United States, which the Mon technically is, without a permit. So

they forced them to go get a permit. Then they were able to challenge the zoning because that area was still zoned as residential. The construction of a wharf and a loading bay and everything else they had to put in there for the barges really gives you a sense of how expensive rail had become to make them go to this effort. They had to get a zoning change. They actually had to get legislation from city council to change the zoning in 1950 from residential to industrial in order to construct all this infrastructure on the riverfront to unload the barges. It was a big undertaking and there was a lot of expense associated with it. Rail must have been very expensive.

Smith: It's just that it's easier to dump from a rail car than a barge. You use a "Watson dumping car" which withdraws the bottom of the car to dump a load. It is hard to do that from a barge.

McElwaine: The loads have to be put on a truck and driven up to the dump from the wharf which was another source of contention for Swisshelm Park because you suddenly have a lot of noise and a lot of traffic.

Smith: Didn't they have a railroad that ran up the pile of slag and just towed it like the lolly cars?

Muller: They stopped doing that in 1950.

Tarr: Another important point is the top-down decision-making process in this area. The Civic Commission really had a lot of important people on it, Richard B. Mellon and so on. These are really very important people but, when push came to shove and decisions had to be made about using the valley, none of the elites wanted to stand up. You can imagine if the Mellons or Armstrongs stood up and said, "No," it might not have happened. They obviously were willing to go along, maybe they had moved out to Ligonier by then. Even so, they put forth these various plans of different kinds, they were opposed by different interests, maybe the steel industry, and they backed off and we get what the valley is today.

McElwaine: These public-private partnerships had big agendas. Nine Mile Run lacked the priority that the main thoroughfares and the downtown district had comparatively.

Tarr: With the Citizens Committee in 1921, the situation was a little different because Nine Mile Run was a much larger part of the recommendations.

Benjamin: In the American Southwest, cities routinely, every ten years, annexed communities to sprawl out. What has

prevented Pittsburgh from doing that? When I first arrived here and looked at the map and saw all these micro municipalities dotting the periphery of Pittsburgh, it seemed so obvious that Pittsburgh should be about four times its current radius.

Tarr: Every single major annexation by the city of Pittsburgh was opposed by the area that was being annexed. There was one in 1846, '57, '67, '72 and then Allegheny City in 1907. In 1907, it was very interesting. Allegheny City, which is the North Side today, was a separate industrial city which had 125,000 people and was annexed against its will. There was state enabling legislation that said annexation could occur by a majority vote of the combined municipalities. More people in Pittsburgh voted than that of Allegheny, so it then was annexed. At that time, a League of Municipalities formed in the county to oppose any further extension by the city of Pittsburgh by annexation. There was a small bit of annexation that occurred in the '20s, but it was small pieces that were being chewed up. There are 131 separate municipalities in the county. Legislation exists in the southwest that allows you to go ahead and annex, but here, forget it.

Community Participant: Also, unlike those other areas, Pennsylvania gives government jurisdiction over every parcel of land; every piece of land in Pennsylvania is inside of a local government. Many governments that were meant to be farm land eventually became strong governments of suburbs. Pittsburgh wasn't the only city in this region, the others really didn't adjoin this site very much. At one time it was the third or fourth largest in southwestern Pennsylvania.

McElwaine: In terms of your question about the land use issue, one of the major differences between the states of the southwest and of the southern states with these large, very powerful counties is that they were slave states. They didn't need a lot of municipalities. Very large, powerful counties had developed because land holding in those regions was fairly large. There was no desire for large municipalities. This land was settled with small holders. Small municipalities made a great deal of sense in terms of managing with those frontier communities. So we never developed those large powerful counties that, for instance, could implement their own land use. This county's land use authority is essentially meaningless because counties in Pennsylvania have no power.

Smith: They developed here river by river and stream by stream. Each municipality was its own settlement. You start at the West End, you go up Saw Mill Run, you then go from West End to McGann's Corner to Shalerville to Seldom Seen to West Liberty to Smithson Station. If you go out to Albuquerque, the Rio Grande runs through the middle of it, there is nothing else. The only place in Albuquerque you have any trouble annexing is right up and down the river. You have little bands of people fighting for independence. Other than that, they annex five or ten thousand acres because there is nothing there except horned frogs.

Thompson: However, there are models for annexing here in the eastern states. I grew up in Indianapolis, Indiana and the house I first lived in was a rural route but now it is within the city limits of Indianapolis. It was a series of small communities. I am not sure of the model because this happened after I left. The city took over the entire limits of Marian County.

Smith: Philadelphia did that; they took over Philadelphia County. The same idea was offered to Pittsburgh, but the city did not want it because there were too many fractious people. They turned it down and they never got another chance.

Muller: Well we came real close, actually. In 1928 or 1927, it would have been a federated city model if it hadn't been rigged by the state legislature, it would have passed. It had the majority vote; it just didn't have the majority vote in the majority of settlements. The idea flew again in about 1937 and was shot down very quickly. The people that were pursuing it backed away for other priorities. It's a give and take issue.

Benjamin: The reason I ask is because it seems like anything that comes up in this region inevitably involves turf battles between rather small municipalities. It just seems that it is a major impediment to almost any kind of problem solving.

Community Participant: And some communities do things that are outrageous because they have the power to do whatever they want with their land.

McElwaine: The University of Pittsburgh's Institute of Politics did a forum on land use in Pittsburgh about a month ago. The secretary of environment of Pennsylvania, Jim Seif, was the closing speaker. Two models were presented. One was in

Oregon which was a land use bound model where you can't develop outside a specific geographic area. The other was in the Minneapolis area where they have tax-sharing. If you move out of the city, you still have to pay the taxes to support the regional infrastructure. So, you get no benefit, particularly, tax-wise from moving one place to another. Seif didn't endorse either model but he did note that, at a minimum, a county should be empowered to manage their own lands and be able to establish regional land use authorities that could set binding regulations on all these municipalities.

Benjamin: Who made the Nine Mile Run proposal and what historical forces formed it? Is it a push from CMU or other interests? Who are the movers and shakers? What is the history of the past five years leading up to this date?

Tarr: On the one hand, there is the intention of the city of Pittsburgh to develop Nine Mile Run in order to create new housing there and to sell housing to bring people back in to the city. Open space issues and the green belt issues and so on, really came out of the interest of two individuals not of this region. They are Tim Collins and Reiko Goto from San Francisco who are visiting artists here. They looked at the early plans and they saw that the initial plans were to culvert the stream. They did not feel there was enough attention being paid towards greenbelt issues and natural issues. They began to try to get together a team of people to meet on their own time and so on, to think about this and plan for open space. We put together a plan with a lot of people at CMU. We got Andrew involved (the Heinz Foundation) and put together a plan we presented to the city to deal with the open space-type issues. We tried to raise and install higher priority and the city, basically, responded positively.

Benjamin: That is where I see my own interests channeled. I had always thought of the slag heaps as an extension of Frick Park. It's sort of stunning to realize that no one else, not even Frick Park Nature Center staff, notices. Basically, they only see that world ends at the bridge. It's sort of stunning to me because I grew up in Minneapolis and the riverway and the waterway is the whole guiding principle of the park system there. For me, it was stunning to see this amazing potential to be sort of squandered by a sewer and being ignored by everybody. When I found out about this project I said, "Yeah, let's go that way."

Muller: Both of your questions have very important cultural issues. I think, personally, the first one speaks to political culture and I think that's ultimately what everybody was saying here. There is a local municipality mind set that is very hard to bang up against. We explored that in many different ways. I saw this in the early '80s from different angles when I got involved in riverfront promotion to try to get the city to think about the riverfront as quality land and as quality opportunity for life in the city. The reaction I received everywhere I went, except for people here and there, but in the civic leadership, by that I mean private and public, was, "You've got to be kidding me." They were polite, usually, but the question was, "Why?" I believe the cultural issue is this. (By the way, I grew up in Regent Square and used Frick Park and the area as a kid.) Up until the mid 1980s, most Pittsburghers, by that I mean the larger metropolitan region and not necessarily Southwestern Pennsylvania, did not view our rivers as amenities. Our rivers were industrial, utilitarian. Beginning with the development of principally steel but also glass works and so on, we began to turn our backs on these rivers. For 75 to 100 years, three or four generations or more never viewed that as real water other than those teenagers who would sneak down to trespass across the railroad and jump in the water (as Michael Weber is always proud to say). On the one hand, I found the last 15 years of looking at the conception of our waterways, tributaries, and riverfronts to see it improve as a highly frustrating event. On the other hand, I can say until 1988 or 1989 there's absolutely no willingness to understand this. It's only since 1988 or 1989 where you can publicly feel these civic leaderships begin to change their view on this. They have a ways to come. I believe you've come smack into that cultural barrier and it's one that I think we are changing. I don't think there is any question, much more so than the political issues.

Benjamin: The first plan that I saw on the wall map in the trailer down the road showed the sketches of the developers. These are the preliminary projects. Their idea is to culvert over the stream for two to three hundred yards and then sort of bury the rest of Nine Mile Run. When I saw that, I was slackjaw stunned.

Community Participant: They were just extending the culvert. They were also proposing to clean up the entire site with that option. They were also talking about

redirecting the sewage, taking it out of the water that was going into that culvert. There was just going to be the stream to a point and then it would flow naturally down to the river. You get pluses; you get minuses.

Smith: It seems to me that we are trying to do two things. We are building a housing development on the slag mountain and developing it as a, what we'll call a greenway, defined for better or for worse as a linear park more or less side by side and without falling all over one another. I'm not all together sure that that's being made clear to everybody as well as the problems that are involved in putting them together side by side. I was as dismayed as Dean was that all of a sudden this is the Nine Mile Run Greenway. Where is Nine Mile Run? "Well, it's in the culvert there." That just doesn't make sense. It is very difficult to develop a place like this. Somehow if we're going to call Nine Mile Run a focus of a greenway, there's got to be a Nine Mile Run there. You've got to be able to see it from one end to the other and maybe that means bridging over. Well, if you're going to go from Swisshelm Park to Squirrel Hill, you'll need a big bridge in the center. Homestead does a whole lot of things with vertical parks and stuff. You need to figure out how to police it. Living next to a stream takes a whole lot more time than you think.

Muller: Restoration is not out of the question nor is the concept of drainage basin to try to deal with the sewage issues. One of the things Friends of the Riverfront have been developing, in terms of their riverfront trail that's slowly starting to make its way around the outer edges of our rivers in Pittsburgh, is, of course, neighborhood ownership. The idea of 'adopt a highway'. You have neighborhoods that take ownership of parts of the stream and those people of the communities will be damn vigilant if, in fact, they embrace that concept. I don't know if that's being proposed or even a good idea but it's very doable. John Stephen is very much an architect of that concept with Friends of the Riverfront. I agree with you about the traditional Western Pennsylvania view of tributaries and creeks.

Benjamin: It may be the cultural thing. When I arrived here, my first experience of this whole area was a hike down the riverbed. Sure, the idea of hiking down Nine Mile creek was probably anathema to everybody. It was a smelly day, but for me, that is where my interest radiates, from the creek outward. As opposed to something

like Beechwood Boulevard across the slag heap downward, that's my boyhood growing up in the land of ten thousand lakes perhaps.

Community Participant: Where does the development plan stand at this point?

Hirsh: A plan has not been chosen. This is all work in progress.

Tarr: There are issues that relate to the sewage and stream, the upstream communities, Wilkinsburg, Edgewood, and so on, and their responsibilities. What is the function of the EPA going to be here and whether that's going to impair the sewers that are leaking and take care of stormwater surge problems, and so on. It's tied up not only in local issues but the role of national policy, in terms of the EPA and their responsibility.

Solomon: There are two models on the effect of bridges on greenways and what the effect on green space might be. The Parkway bridge and up in the park at the Forbes Avenue bridge, hawks nested under the old bridge at Forbes Avenue. Now, there is nothing nesting. Under the Parkway bridge, it's kind of sterile. Smelly slag heaps are a remarkable gathering place for mocking birds and great for the endangered tree down there. So, it's an area that will stand a lot more resurgence.

Thompson: I'm from the Carnegie Museum of Natural History and we're involved in the flora and fauna study but we are constantly monitoring the plants. The key indicators of all diversity are the insects which nobody's looked at in that area. We want to run one set of light trap samples and, in fact, one of the light trap samples is on the slag top up above the bridge and it has a sample.

Marino: Maybe this whole process has to deal with how everyone perceives a park. Eloise has said that the objective here is to make a park. But the fact that there is already a trail and the people recognize that there are endangered species, all this seems to me that there is a park there. It's just that most of the people don't know about it because there's a gate that stops at Commercial Street so nobody really passes there. When you're on top of Forbes Avenue, and you look out over that bridge and you see all of that green, you know that Frick Park is under there. There's all the trails; people explore there. When you're on top of the Parkway, likewise, it's right over Nine Mile Run. It's equally beautiful and green. People don't realize that there is a trail through there that's really exotic with interesting discoveries to make.

Thompson: I had the same thought. When people were asking about creating a greenway, I thought in a sense, it already is a greenway. The times I've been out, there's always people using it as a trail to go from the city down to the river. Maybe it doesn't go directly to the river and you cross a road and go through some parking in the end. In a sense, it already is a greenway.

Marino: So what makes it a greenway? Some signage and commissioned park benches?

Smith: Let's be practical and say what is really driving this whole proposal is the thought that the city of Pittsburgh is going to get a lot of \$100,000 houses with a \$100,000 valuation into the treasury which will help it to stay afloat as a city. Let's not lose track of that. Part of this whole project is to balance the various interests and to be careful of what we are doing and not get carried away by one thing or the other. Well it's fine to say a developer sees land and he wants to make it as flat as he can as quick as he can and put as many developmental units on it, and many of them do. But, on the other hand, if you come in and say, "Well, I don't want to do that," then it may make you noble but that doesn't mean you automatically have a viable plan. Your plan has to work if you want a greenway. It has to work in and of itself. It won't work just because your motives are noble.

McElwaine: The economic benefits of the greenway are not just the construction of the housing. Recent studies have shown that existing housing close to a greenway, increases in value and appreciates in value by about 30 percent.

Smith: I live next to one and I know the number of people who want to drink beer there and dump trash there.

McElwaine: Well, that is a fair complaint.

Smith: That is why there is a gate there, so people won't love it in that way.

McElwaine: Well, we ought to be wrapping up. Any final thoughts on context and history? If not, we'll report something back in a few minutes. Thank you.