

# GETTING A FIX ON THE UNFIXABLE

LAST week, I argued that our biggest problems are unfixable.

But calling a problem unfixable doesn't mean we should do nothing about it — and any reader who thinks it does was already looking for an excuse.

The sane course of action when faced with an unfixable problem is to rebuild it into something we can realistically fix. The point of being realistic is to avoid self-defeating effort, not to avoid effort altogether.

And just to be clear, I'm not bummed about everything that's under way in Philadelphia.

Center City may be the best downtown in North America, possessing a live-and-work density that other places can only dream of. University City is emerging as a knowledge hotspot of global stature.

As these merge into a single place over the next decade, united rather than divided by the Schuylkill, greater Center City may expand from a good 100,000-per son place into a great 200,000-per son place.

This is the core of the "happy half-million" I wrote about last

**SIDEWALK CRITIC**



**MARK ALAN HUGHES**

week. They're not all rich, just all in a place where their prospects are bright — like a Boston, Seattle or Charlotte, N.C., sitting in the center of Philadelphia.

But the city as a whole, which includes another million or so residents, is a place

where America's greatest failings get stored not get fixed.

I chose poverty as one illustration of an unfixable problem. But the list is long: unresolved claims on racial reconciliation, deferred maintenance of physical infrastructure constructed generations ago, and the organized neglect of the young and elderly.

(And to be clear, gun violence is NOT an unfixable problem. In fact, the tragedy is that it's completely fixable using the legal, financial and human resources already present in Philadelphia.)

People have many reasons to avoid unfixable problems, and we couldn't design a better way to isolate them than the warehouse called Philadelphia.

And here's the twist: One of the reasons that greater Center City has prospered over the last

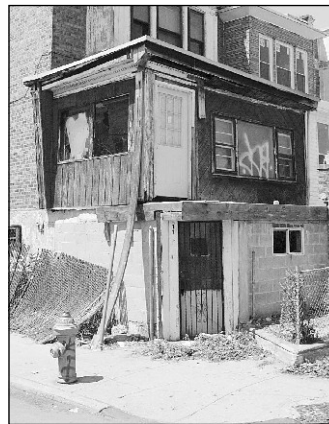
decade is that these unfixable problems are now as isolated from Society Hill and Rittenhouse Square as they are from Wayne and Moorestown.

The Center City District has uncoupled the quality of Center City neighborhood services from the quality delivered citywide.

The real-estate tax abatement on new construction has severed the obligation that new residents contribute to the local tax burden over the foreseeable future.

The preference for Center City children in Center City public schools as well as the expansion of Philadelphia's independent schools (compare notes with a New Yorker sometime on getting a child into kindergarten) have reduced the personal need to fix public schools citywide.

I'm not criticizing these mechanisms, just pointing out that they weaken the ties between the happy half-million and the rest of the city. That's not an ac-



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cident — it's the whole point.

If we hadn't figured out ways to weaken those ties, Center City would have continued to depopulate, its current residents living instead in the suburbs or a downtown elsewhere.

It's rarely said clearly, but we now accept that it's self-defeating to use the city's own resources, concentrated among its affluent residents, to support all of the enormous needs located within the city.

In fact, we've spent the last decade attracting the affluent by reducing their social liability for the rest of the city to a level roughly equal to the liability felt in the suburbs and Harrisburg.

So, what about that other million or so Philadelphians whose prospects range from bleak to precarious? How do we rebuild that unfixable problem into something we can fix?

The textbook answer is to tap the resources of state and federal government. The mayors of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina or San Diego after the wildfires never had to state that obvious fact.

Philadelphians should act only as Pennsylvanians and Americans when contributing resources to fight its unfixable problems. With more Democrats in Harrisburg and Washington, I am more, shall we say, optimistic about that approach.

But the more interesting — and provocative — answers are bottom-up rather than top-down: People need the resources to find opportunities where they already exist. For several hundred thousand Philadelphians, the future would be brighter in Phoenix or Florida than in Philadelphia.

But it's easier to store folks here (to the benefit of machine politics and nonprofit life-supporters) than to engage in conversations about how to go over the horizon in search of a better life. ★

Mark Alan Hughes is the Robert A. Fox Leadership Fellow at Penn and a second-year architecture student at PennDesign. E-mail: [mahughes@sas.upenn.edu](mailto:mahughes@sas.upenn.edu).



By **RICHARD BERMAN**

FROM ATKINS to Weight Watchers, South Beach to the Zone, there are a ton of trendy weight-loss programs.

Can't decide? Don't have the time or desire to count calories or carbs? Don't worry. The Philadelphia City Council will choose for you if they support HB 1108.

Councilwoman Blondell Reynolds Brown's bill — the latest quick-fix diet scheme proposed in the name of public health — assumes consumers can't tell the difference between french fries and fruit cups. It would require restaurants to turn their menus into encyclopedias featuring long lists of nutritional warnings next to every item. For most of us, a back page of fat-and-calorie notes would suffice. But Brown, who wrongly believes it will encourage better eating habits, would rather force us to suffer through the informational equivalent of an ice-cream headache before ordering lunch.

## City Council's 'Nanny Diet'

Nutrition activists have already failed at the knowledge-equals-behavior approach. In the early 1990s, they pushed the government to mandate nutrition information on grocery items, but healthier eating habits didn't follow. Most people who reported using those "nutrition facts" to

### OPINION

fill their shopping carts were the ones who already considered themselves health-conscious.

Proponents of this menu effort often cite studies based on focus groups or questionnaires. But the data comes from asking people, in front of others, what they would likely order from labeled and unlabeled menus. Not surprisingly, most claim they'd select the lowest-calorie food.

While people talk a good game in surveys and focus groups, few Americans change their eating when faced with a nutritional profile. In the real world, studies show that meal selection is primarily influenced by factors like smell, taste, texture, hunger, cravings, time and convenience — not diet facts.

Besides, the bill only targets restaurants with standardized menus and 10 or more locations. This excludes most of Philadelphia's eateries, including cheese-steak and hoagie stands, sports arenas and fancy establishments. And, last month, a federal judge struck down New York's version of HB 1108, ruling that it conflicted with federal authority. So menu-labeling fiats aren't just silly. They're also illegal.

Restaurant-industry officials

gave Council another reason to oppose the bill: It's totally impractical. Their complaints ranged from the heavy cost of testing the food and printing menus to the lawsuits that would pour in from customers who ate two more calories than promised.

So why is Brown ignoring this losing track record and pushing the bill for approval before the 2007 session ends in December?

WHILE anyone with an IQ above room temperature knows the difference between fried chicken and a salad, most restaurants already provide nutrition information. And dieters and picky eaters can find nutrition facts on posters, in brochures, on Web sites and at 800 numbers.

There's a huge difference between personal responsibility

and dietary paternalism. Under the law, calorie counts for every item will be plastered across menus, whether you want them or not. And this will have unintended consequences.

A chorus of researchers is cautioning regulators about the collateral damage of programs like menu-labeling. While health officials have placed increasing emphasis on obesity rates, the incidence of eating disorders has nearly tripled. As New York Sen. Hillary Clinton put it, "Many adolescents misinterpret" the fight against obesity "as a message that they should eat to achieve the body of a runway model. Anorexia and bulimia are increasingly common among our . . . youth."

Americans should still have a right to guilt-free eating. ★

Richard Berman is executive director of the Center for Consumer Freedom, a nonprofit coalition supported by restaurants, food companies and consumers.