

# Occupy Pittsburgh Now

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SPECIAL BULLETIN

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## MAKING PITTSBURGH GREAT AGAIN?

### URA / Private Partners Renew Push For Controversial Project

OPN's investigative article in March 2016 about a Public/Private partnership formed between the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), University of Pittsburgh and CMU, involves seizing publicly owned land to build a private roadway shuttle system-using autonomous vehicles, through the Junction Hollow section of Schenley Park. At that time, sources revealed- a big reason for the project was to establish a beachhead towards an eventual privatization of our Public Transit system. Penn-Live.com's report on Mayor Peduto's behind-the-scenes relationship with Uber, including emails acquired through Right to Know Requests, seems to support our initial report. Evidence now shows a major reason for the URA proposed roadway is to nail down hesitant signers-on to the Almono development by forcing it into another, much needed project. There is also much more to the story:

#### The Synopsis

Formerly known as the Oakland Transit Connector, the plan has most recently been referred to as the Monongahela to Oakland link or Mobility Trail, as in the renewed project's Request For Qualifications. Starting in the community of Panther Hollow, the route would commandeer the narrow city streets of each neighborhood at both ends, carving out a large section of the Junction Hollow portion of Schenley Park and ending up in Pittsburgh's Four Mile Run neighborhood aka The Run, before continuing on to the planned Almono development in Hazelwood, recently rebranded as Hazelwood Green.

Residents of both communities in the crosshairs of the proposed route are adamantly opposed to the plan. The extremely invasive nature of the route and the every-5-minutes 24-7 frequency of shuttle traffic, could erase both historic neighborhoods, and would certainly erase a major portion of publicly owned parkland. By the city's admission, a portion of the route is deemed to city residents to remain public parkland.

#### The Partners

The URA, an extension of the Mayor's office, formed a Public Private partnership with UPITT and CMU in 2015 and announced the plan via the press. Uber and CMU have teamed up on driverless technology, and at the Hazelwood site Uber operates a test track for their autonomous vehicle program, including a vehicular roundabout. CMU most recently broke ground there for their expanding robotics program. A resident investigation discovered a 2009 CMU study, citing a goal for more student housing to be built at the development, and the recently announced major UPMC expansion plan allows for easy dot-connecting. Both universities wish to build publicly subsidized student housing at the site.

#### The Owners

The Heinz Endowments and the Richard King Mellon and Benedum Foundations co-own the Hazelwood Green site, and it's directors speak to and meet with Mayor Bill Peduto on a regular basis. As revealed in a Sept. 11, 2017 Post-Gazette report - "I rely on {the foundations} very much," said Mr. Peduto, "we'll be recognized in the future Pittsburgh for what we've done much in the same way that the {David} Lawrence administration is recognized in the Hill, East Liberty, and in the North Side, for the way urban renewal was done then."

What some consider shocking about the Mayor's statements, is the selective memory of the Lawrence administrations approach to, and the results of development projects in those communities, as in the eradication of 95 acres of homes and businesses displacing more than 8000 residents in the Lower Hill. In East Liberty, the URA demolished 1200 homes, reduced the size of the shopping district by 1 million square feet, resulting in the loss of hundreds of businesses and 4500 people. Recent East Liberty development has resulted in even more displacement of businesses and residents, and the elimination of public space. The Mayor's office has been heavily criticized for it's red carpet approach to development.

#### The Needs of The People

The Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy recently began facilitating a major storm/waste-water management project at the Four Mile Run Watershed that includes parts of Squirrel Hill, Oakland, Hazelwood and Greenfield, and the restoration of Panther Hollow Lake. According to Phronesis, the contractor tasked with designing the plan, over 6 million gallons of storm and wastewater from those higher, border communities end up in The Run. During heavy storms, flash floods have overtaken the neighborhood's streets, basements and cars, resulting in expensive out-of-pocket replacement costs for residents. Several feet high geysers blow up through manhole covers, flood waters have seeped up from basements to first floors, and the most recent flash flood necessitated a rescue by Pittsburgh firefighters of a resident and his young son clinging to the top of the family car. As development has increased exponentially over time on higher ground, as in Oakland, flooding in The Run has occurred more frequently.

#### The Double Cross

At a much anticipated public meeting in The Run to showcase the preliminary drawings of the watershed plan in September 2017, the Parks Conservancy unveiled large architectural drawings that included a gently rendered 20 foot wide "bike path" along Junction Hollow and a vehicular traffic roundabout near Panther Hollow Lake.

A question posed about the curious width of the bike path was met with "Bikers along there like to go really fast," and "it's a public safety issue." An answer from an official about the vehicular roundabout was "This is all conceptual right now, these {drawings} will probably change." Attendees at the meetings are encouraged to post their comments, likes and dislikes about the plan, and the Conservancy's published summary shows the general public's strong preference for natural, ecological preservation of the Junction Hollow trail.

In mid-October, when asked about the rather covert illustration of the "bike path", a source within the Parks Conservancy replied, "We're not being covert", "We had no choice, we had to {include the roadway}" - "No one will sign onto {the Hazelwood development} unless it's built." Since that initial Parks Conservancy meeting, the renderings of the watershed plan now includes a more physically defined version of the private roadway and roundabout, incorporated onto the flood control plan.

Furthermore, Run residents were told by officials that in order to secure the funding for the storm-water plan,

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## ROAD WARS

An OPN News Editorial

**"If you do not change your direction, you may end up where you are heading" Loa Tzu**

As Mayor, Bill Peduto is the number one representative of the people of Pittsburgh. So it's all the more important to ask, and continue to ask, "Who does Number One work for?" In Pittsburgh, Mayor Peduto is generally regarded as a good guy with good intentions, even by those who might disagree with certain policies he proposes. But it's not intentions that count - we know where the road paved with good intentions leads. What really matters is how those intentions play out when the rubber meets the road. Unfortunately, when it comes to certain development projects, it seems the Mayor is taking a completely one-sided approach: the side of the developers, not the citizens of Pittsburgh.

Many local public servants are working on transportation-related projects to relieve road congestion, reduce greenhouse gas, address mobility needs, and make Pittsburgh a "Complete Streets" city. But a major part of these intertwined projects is a controversial proposal: the URA's proposed private roadway plan through Schenley Park, meant to serve the Hazelwood Green development in the neighborhood of Hazelwood.

The URA/Private Partnership means to seize public property by forcing a highway through the middle of the Junction Hollow portion of Schenley Park, as well as commandeering publicly owned city streets at both ends in the neighborhoods of Panther Hollow and Four Mile Run, in order to link the two Oakland university campuses to the development in Hazelwood. Another part of the plan includes non-taxable housing that UPMC and CMU wants to build on those mostly vacant 178 acres, ultimately shuttling future students/customers back and forth via autonomous vehicles on public land.

A large majority of residents in both at-risk communities oppose the roadway. And officials' duplicitous implication that Hazelwood's economic troubles over the last few decades is due to a "lack of mobility" couldn't be more disingenuous.

Pittsburgh's transportation issues are largely due to successive draconian budget cuts by the PA State Legislature, causing underfunding of our Public Transit system, and causing basic travel hardships for many Pittsburghers who make up a significant portion of the work force. But rather than tackle this austerity-driven issue at the source - our State capitol in Harrisburg - or work towards a solution that honors the needs of local communities, local officials are opting to push through their preferred solution that uses public land for private gain. This is privatization of the Commons: corporations and other privateers taking over public land, property and assets collectively owned by all citizens.

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**"This is not the route  
you're looking for."**

#NOT4US

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a neighborhood survey was needed, and was recently conducted in Summer/Fall 2017. Residents asked that city officials not schedule public meetings on the roadway until survey results were revealed, but officials scheduled two meetings in neighboring Squirrel Hill on November 14 and 15, and some feel they were not properly notified- many found out through a social media post made less than a week beforehand. Additionally, the Squirrel Hill Urban Coalition hosted an Open House by invitation on November 16th at the same location to showcase the Watershed drawings. Results of the neighborhood survey were finally released on November 28, at what some residents say was a contentious meeting with public officials.

This raises many questions- especially: What unnamed official(s) directed the Parks Conservancy to force an unnecessary private roadway plan on top of a much needed major storm/waste-water management project, part of which is directed by the federal EPA in order to separate storm and waste water within Pittsburgh's sewer system? Why did city officials schedule public meetings in bordering communities before survey results were released and after being asked not to? Why has the proposed roadway become more physically defined in the architectural drawings of the water management plan over time?

**(Lies, Damned lies and) Statistics**

At the public meeting on November 15th, Department of Mobility and Infrastructure Director Karina Ricks cited "lack of mobility" in Hazelwood as a need for the roadway, and offered a few mobility-related statistics as proof, while seeming to imply that poverty is rooted in a lack of mobility. A few attendees commented that City officials were pitting one neighborhood against another by subtle implication- namely, that if residents of The Run/Panther Hollow do not get behind the roadway plan, they would be to blame for a failure to revitalize Hazelwood. But- the chronic neglect caused by successive city administrations over decades is the reason Hazelwood's needs have not been met.

Furthermore, some Hazelwood residents have confirmed that the city has for a few years claimed that the Almono/HG development is essential to the revitalization of their neighborhood, and by extension the roadway is essential to the success of the development site. City officials never revealed the plan to Four Mile Run and Panther Hollow residents until announcing it through a *Post-Gazette* article published August 31,

2015, although it was being discussed matter-of-factly outside the two at-risk communities.

Another reason cited by officials is commute times from Hazelwood to Oakland, claiming 30-40 minutes, seemingly based on rush hour traffic times. Residents tested their claim by driving already existing routes at varying times with a stopwatch. The 2nd Ave-Bates street corridor, from Hazelwood to the main campuses in Oakland took 12-14 minutes. Varying existing routes from the intersection of Saline, Greenfield and Irvine streets took under 5 minutes to Forbes Ave. in Oakland.

**The Deja Vu All Over Again**

As in the 1950's and 60's, recent Pittsburgh development has resulted in long-term resident-cleansing in communities such as East Liberty (again) and Lawrenceville. While taking a chainsaw approach to revitalization, the subsequent artificially created real estate bubble has led to extreme gentrification. Residents are forced out of their neighborhoods through various means. New "market rate" housing balloons up average rents and purchase costs of homes, and will most likely lead to exorbitant property tax increases. Promises made by city officials to not make the same mistakes as in the past, end up lost in the feeding frenzy that has followed the behind-closed-door meetings with politicians and private partners. Continuing to build more expensive market rate housing in our city while Pittsburgh is 21,000 units short of affordable housing seems exceptionally brazen.

**The Smoke and Mirrors**

City officials are now trying to reboot their efforts while claiming a "robust public process" by holding public meetings in bordering neighborhoods, while suggesting that no final decisions have been made, but:

Without prior consultation with residents, the city formed a Public Private partnership, filed a State of PA grant application which contained numerous untrue statements, then announced the plan via the media.

Information revealed by a Parks Conservancy source confirms the decision was made behind-closed-doors, and a main reason being, to nail down hesitant signers on to the publicly subsidized Hazelwood development- by guaranteeing yet another publicly subsidized project- a private roadway.

Drawings of the anti-flooding plan includes the resident opposed roadway being more defined over time from it's initial unveiling.

While attending Bloomfield's Columbus Day parade in October, Panther Hollow resident Carlino Giampolo asked County Executive Rich Fitzgerald about Karina

Ricks decision to not file an application for federal TIGER funds for the project, Fitzgerald angrily replied- "She is not the decision maker"

At the November 15th public meeting, Ms Ricks was asked "Where does the data city officials are collecting at these meetings go to, who sees it, and who ultimately makes the decision on building the roadway", but the question went unanswered.

What seems clear, is that city officials are merely feigning transparency by holding public meetings in surrounding neighborhoods, using what many believe to be misleading statistics and cherry-picked facts; trying to manufacture consent outside of the at-risk neighborhoods and create an "aura of inevitability" to bulldoze over the wishes and needs of the residents.

**The Resistance**

The neighborhood survey in The Run shows their needs are in stopping the frequent flooding, and a large majority are opposed to the roadway. After the 2015 State of PA grant application for the project was squelched, the city submitted a proposal for the federal Smart Cities Grant competition, shifting priority to the proposed Oakland to Hazelwood link from their original focus- another controversial plan: the \$200 million BRT-Oakland-to-Downtown rapid bus project. At that time, a 457 signature petition opposing the roadway was electronically delivered via Change.org, to Mayor Bill Peduto. The petition included signatures by 7 members of the Greenfield Community Association's Development/Transportation Committee. A letter writing campaign asking that Pittsburgh not be awarded the grant was organized and sent to the Secretary of the Department of Transportation, that included OPN's initial investigative report and the petition link. It is unknown whether this was a factor in Pittsburgh's failure to secure the federal grant.

**If It's Not For All, It's Not For Us**

City officials assert a need for the private roadway, but according to Laura Weins of Pittsburghers for Public Transit, "We interact all the time with residents regarding transit", " We have not heard of any demand for more transit options from Hazelwood residents."

As their neighborhood survey proves, Run residents aren't in need of better mobility, and are opposed to any transit stop bringing an invasion of park-and-ride-commuters onto their streets. The city's proposed private roadway project could erase two communities for private interests to benefit financially through publicly subsidized development, while privatizing public land.

**Road Wars**

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This fits within the current dominant Neoliberal philosophy about basic public services - purposefully de-fund those services, (while continually shrinking revenue via government giveaways in the form of corporate welfare) then point at those services as unworkable and claim they must be privatized. This is a form of gaslighting the public - pushing them to believe that the solution to all issues is to allow corporations and the 1% to own and control all things, while charging excessive, ever-increasing amounts of money to the public for using those basic services.

Imagine a forest fire started on purpose, then fighting the fire with a garden hose tied in knots. With privatization, not only do you no longer own the hose, or control the flow of water or the means to direct the flow, but also the whole time the water is trickling down, the privatized meter is running up the ever-increasing bill.

Granting private companies the right to use and profit from basic public services

creates an unaccountable monopoly. In the case of transportation, the public continues to subsidize the maintenance costs of roads, bridges, busways etc., but then additionally pays a private entity to travel on those streets and highways, while no longer collectively owning those assets. In essence, privatizing the profit while socializing the losses. Nice work, as they say, if you can get it.

The URA's proposed private roadway plan includes a number of highly profitable organizations that dominate policy and land use in Pittsburgh, in this case UPMC/PITT, CMU, and this time joined by wanna-be Uber.

On this familiar road, what is especially hard to navigate is the willingness of our local officials to work with and reward Uber, a company that breaks the rules, makes up its own rules, or cheats within them with assistance by elected officials. Why is the City of Pittsburgh making deals with this kind of entity? Because, according to Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald while defending the private roadway project: "You can't stop the future."

*"That's the standard technique of privatization: defund, make sure things don't work, people get angry, you hand it over to private capital."*

Noam Chomsky

Heavy-handed action within a shroud of secrecy is Uber's modus operandi, and that seems to be our local representatives' approach to development in the case of this, and other recent plans. Just take a look at the details within their proposal to Amazon's HQ2 contest submitted just recently. But... we can't, because what's in the Amazon proposal is secret. Fittingly and unsurprisingly, possible locations pitched to Amazon includes the Hazelwood Green property as a destination for their new headquarters.

According to Kevin Acklin, head of the URA and until recently Mayor Peduto's Chief of Staff, quoted in a Dec.2015 *Pittsburgh City Paper* article about resident opposition to the roadway plan:

"We are an evolving city. We can't just sit idly by and not take advantage of this new economy."

But the new economy is merely the 19th century economy recycled, renamed and repackaged, with even more automation and a greater disparity of wealth. The new economy is just another way of saying trickle down economy, or as in this specific case, "Economic Development and Job Creation."

Our local representatives are driving us to the future while using the rearview mirror as a steering wheel. Giving away the Commons, as though our city is the business in a going-out-of-business sale, is a cannibalistic and unsustainable path on the road to ruin.

Mayor Peduto deserves some credit for working to try to make our city a better place, but the road to the future of Pittsburgh depends upon its people getting involved by taking the wheel, demanding accountability and complete transparency as our representatives seek solutions to our common issues. Anything less should be met with citizens blocking this road to ruin by any means necessary.



OPN is committed to serving informing and educating the 99% of the greater Pittsburgh area. By fulfilling this mission, OPN can influence public debate and contribute locally to the international goal of economic and social justice.  
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Justice Black-New York Times v United States, 403 U.S. 713 (1971)

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