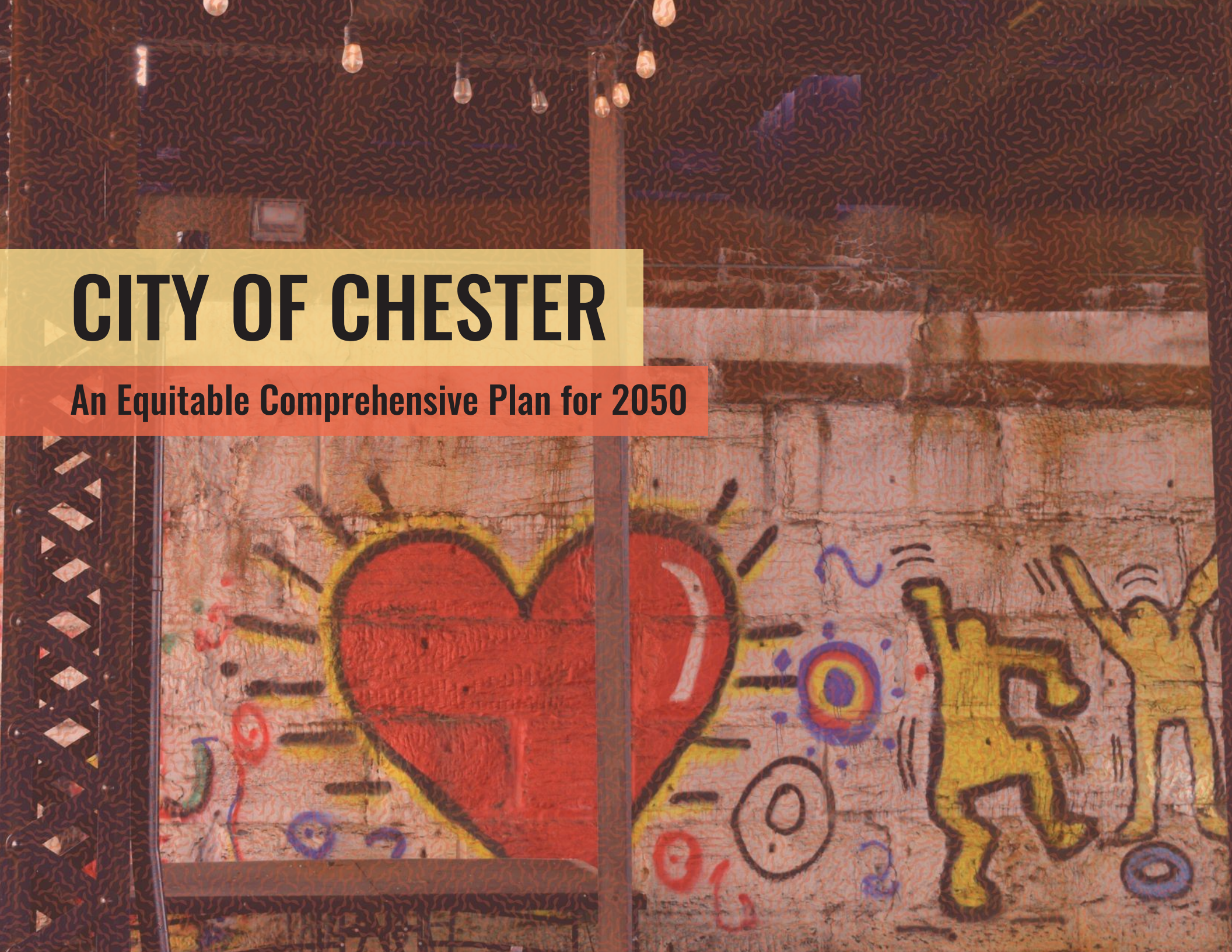


The background of the slide features a photograph of a mural on a wall. The mural is painted on a light-colored, textured surface and includes a large red heart with yellow outlines, a yellow sun-like shape, and two yellow figures with raised arms. To the left of the mural is a dark, patterned metal fence. Above the mural, several string lights with warm-toned bulbs are visible against a dark, patterned ceiling.

CITY OF CHESTER

An Equitable Comprehensive Plan for 2050



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Our team would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to everyone who assisted with the creation of this plan. Thank you especially to our Studio Instructor, Miles Owen, without whom this book and project would not have been possible. We are grateful to Chester’s Planning & Zoning Director, Paul Fritz, for sharing his time and advice on the intricacies of Chester as we developed this project. We also appreciate the encouragement and leadership of our studio faculty lead, Summer Dong, and the rest of the Studio Instructors and Weitzman School of Design faculty and staff. We are inspired by and grateful to the people of Chester for continuing to advocate for a better future for themselves and future generations.

The City of Chester is located within Delaware County, Pennsylvania, 15 miles southwest from Philadelphia and northeast of Wilmington, Delaware. Chester’s population and economic wellbeing have historically been tied to its working waterfront. Although Chester was a wartime boom town in the early 21st century, deindustrialization hit the city hard, and Chester’s middle-class population declined quickly starting in the 1950s. In pursuit of a vanishing tax base, city officials brokered deals with increasingly polluting industries along the waterfront in the 1980s and 1990s. Years of systemic disinvestment in the city from throughout the region has led to deteriorated living conditions, high rates of poverty and unemployment, and struggles with mental health and chronic illness for many residents.

Today, Chester’s residents experience the worst of both worlds – increasingly polluting industries with declining economic benefits – and the City is going through bankruptcy. Past revitalization attempts have fallen short of creating transformative change and Chester’s poor reputation has persisted. Despite these challenges, Chester’s residents and community groups are engaged and working together to make their community better. A state-appointed receiver is charting a sustainable financial path for the city while new political leadership is also focused on enacting substantive change.

The City of Chester and its residents have experienced and continue to face many challenges, but they are resilient. Equitable Chester 2050 focuses on investing in Chester’s municipal capacity, infrastructure, neighborhoods, and people to achieve its vision:

By 2050, Chester is a vibrant waterfront city where residents, workers, and visitors come together to work, play, and pray. The city’s governance and finances are stable; its physical and social infrastructure is repaired; its residents and neighborhoods are connected; and it is a regional economic and recreational hub.

The goals and recommendations presented in Equitable Chester 2050 have an explicit focus on equity. This is a response not only to community distrust of the planning process, but also to the longer legacy of systemic disinvestment that residents have experienced as Pennsylvania’s largest majority Black city.

The plan’s four goals are:

- 1) Stabilize Chester’s finances & governance;
- 2) Repair housing & legacy of disinvestment;
- 3) Connect neighborhoods & improve quality of life
- 4) Transform Chester into a regional destination.

Recommendations emphasize stabilizing Chester’s municipal finances, providing opportunities to build intergenerational wealth, and rebuilding trust between government and residents. Recommendations also focus on repairing housing stock and maintaining affordability, reconnecting neighborhoods and improving Chester’s connections to the broader region, and revitalizing Chester’s waterfront to the benefit of current and future residents, as well as visitors.

This plan charts a course to 2050, but is not set in stone; there are opportunities for engagement with residents and local community groups in nearly every recommendation. At the conclusion of each goal, we have included a section on the community’s role as well as other partners. This is important because Chester has invested local community groups, and the City needs to bring them along as partners in this process for the plan to be successful. If effectively implemented, this plan includes building blocks to help address some of the systemic challenges and legacy of disinvestment that

1



2



3



4



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CONTENTS

EXISTING CONDITIONS



HISTORY
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DEMOGRAPHICS
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HOUSING
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POLITICAL CONTEXT

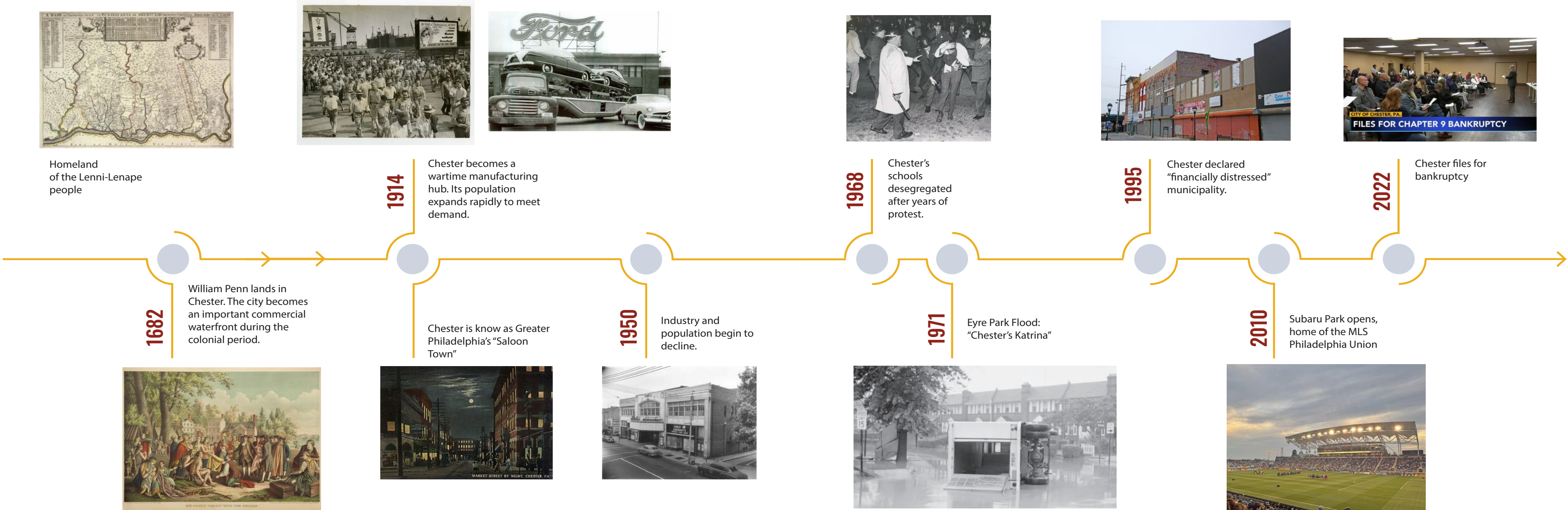




Fig. 1: Deshong Park



Fig. 2: Crozer Library

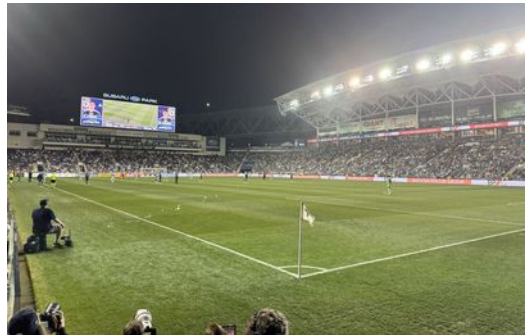


Fig. 3: Subaru Park



Fig. 4: ReWorld Incinerator

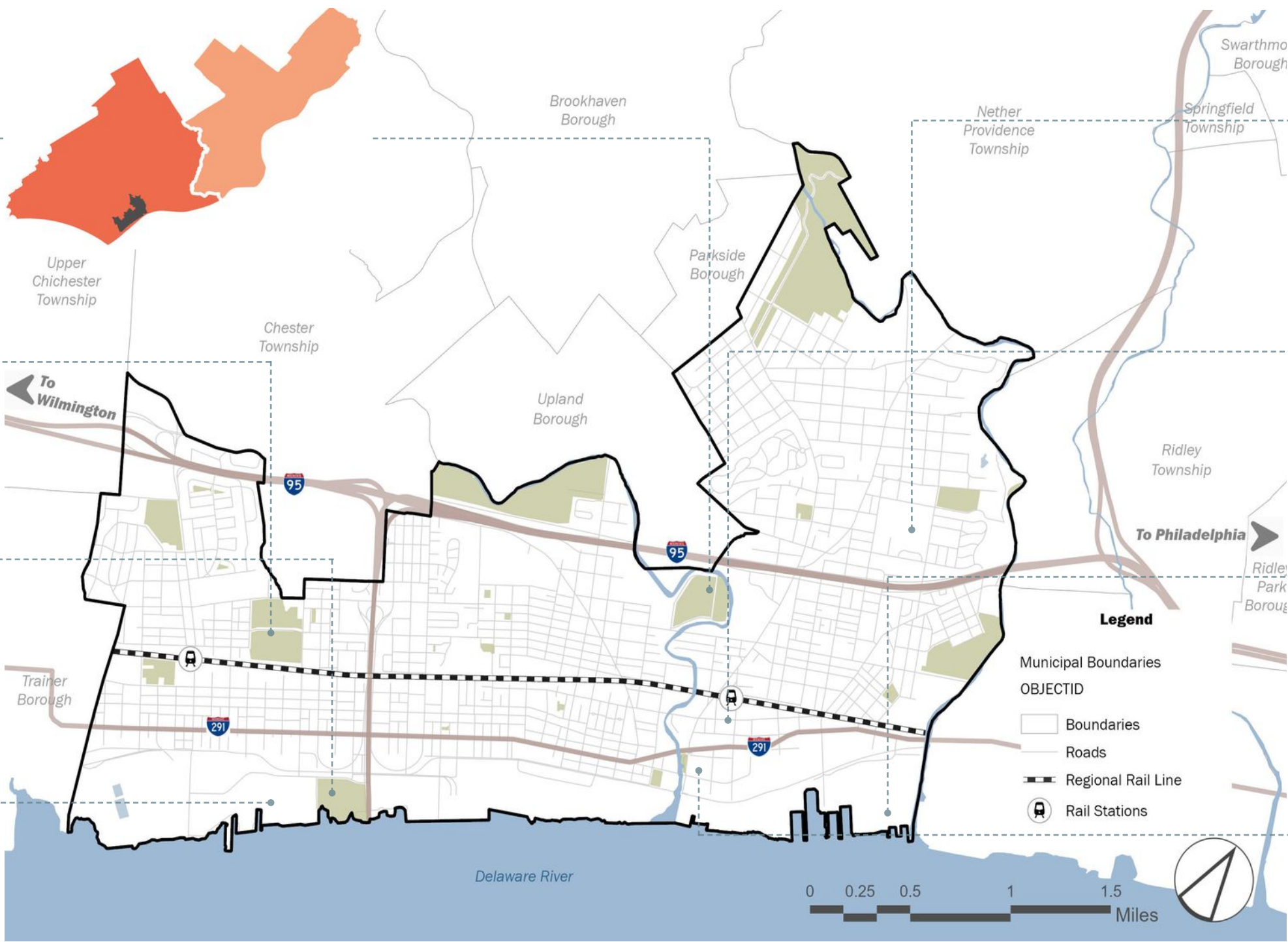


Fig. 5: Widener University



Fig. 6: Downtown Business District



Fig. 7: Harrah's Casino

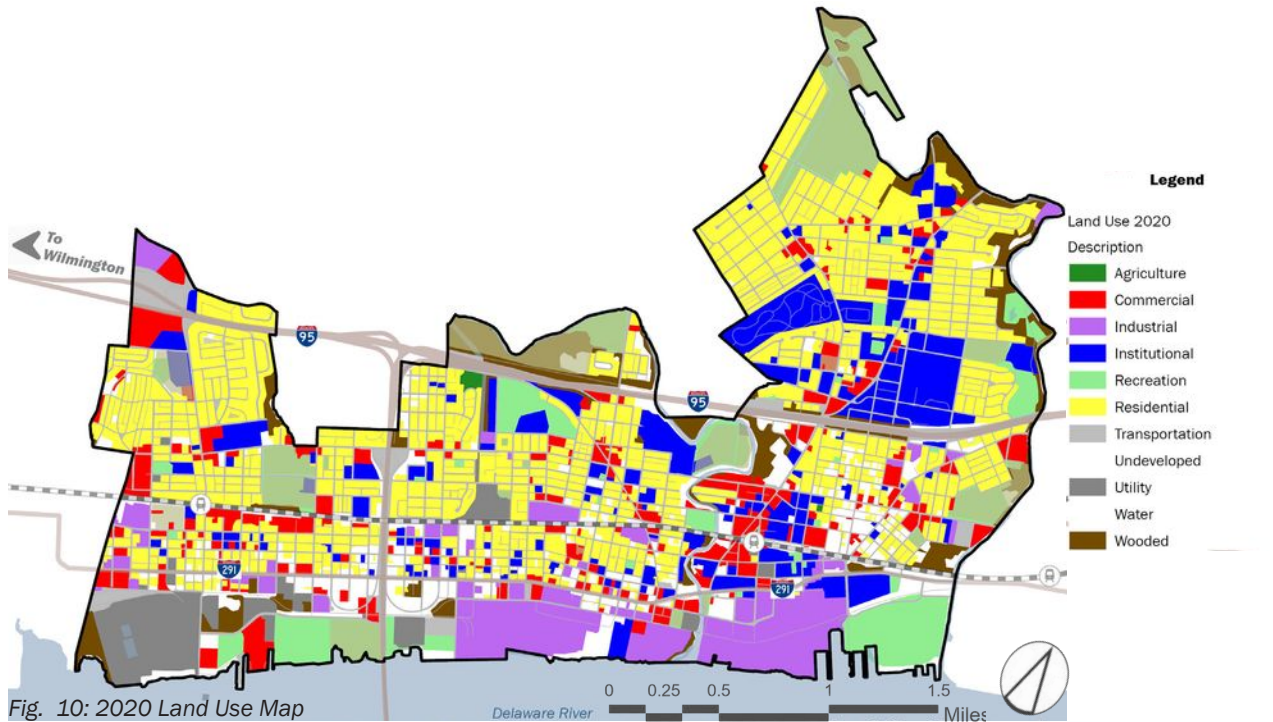
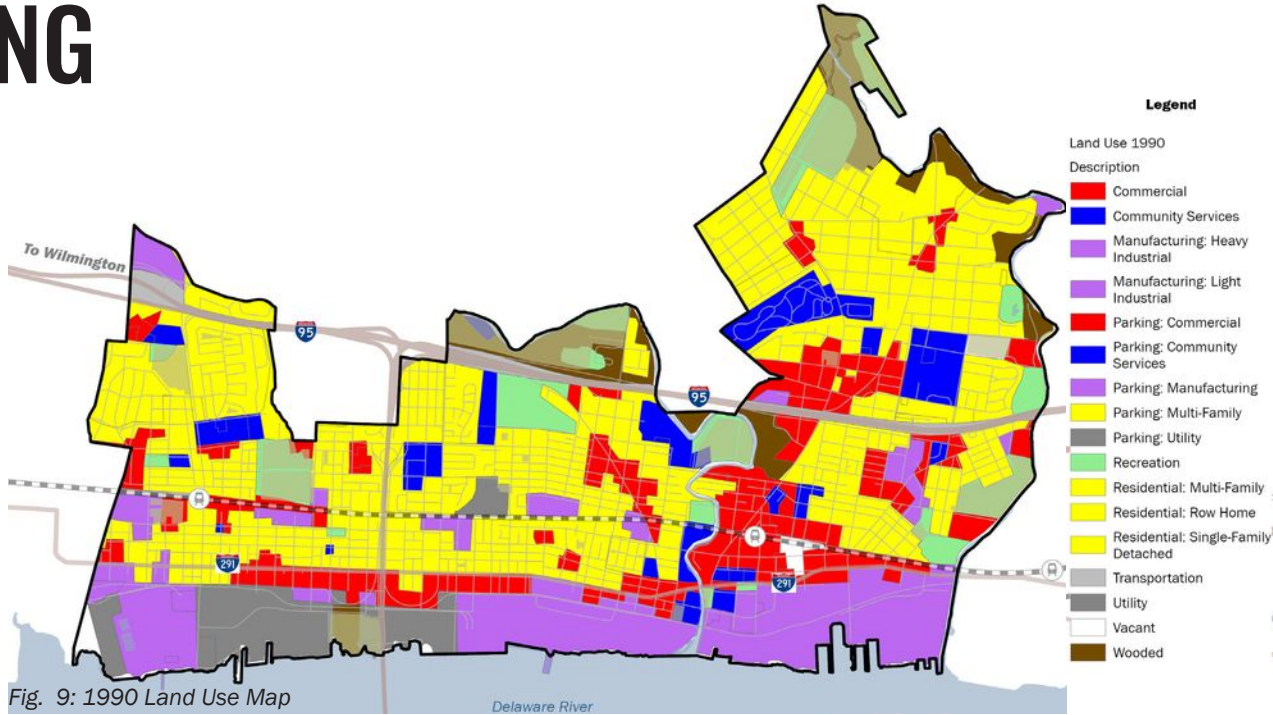


Fig. 8: Ethel Waters Park

LAND USE & ZONING

As recently as 1990, Chester’s waterfront area was primarily industrial. The city’s commercial center occupied the historic downtown area, while the rest of the city was largely residential.

Today, while Chester’s waterfront is still largely industrial, there are a variety of new recreational spaces along the Delaware River. Light industrial zones primarily include warehouses and auto shops while heavy industrial zones have more polluting industries, including the incinerator. There are overlays for the central business district and waterfront, which allow for mixed-use and more dense development than elsewhere in Chester. Finally, the greater amount of institutional land in the northeast quadrant of the city reflects the expanding footprint of Widener University.



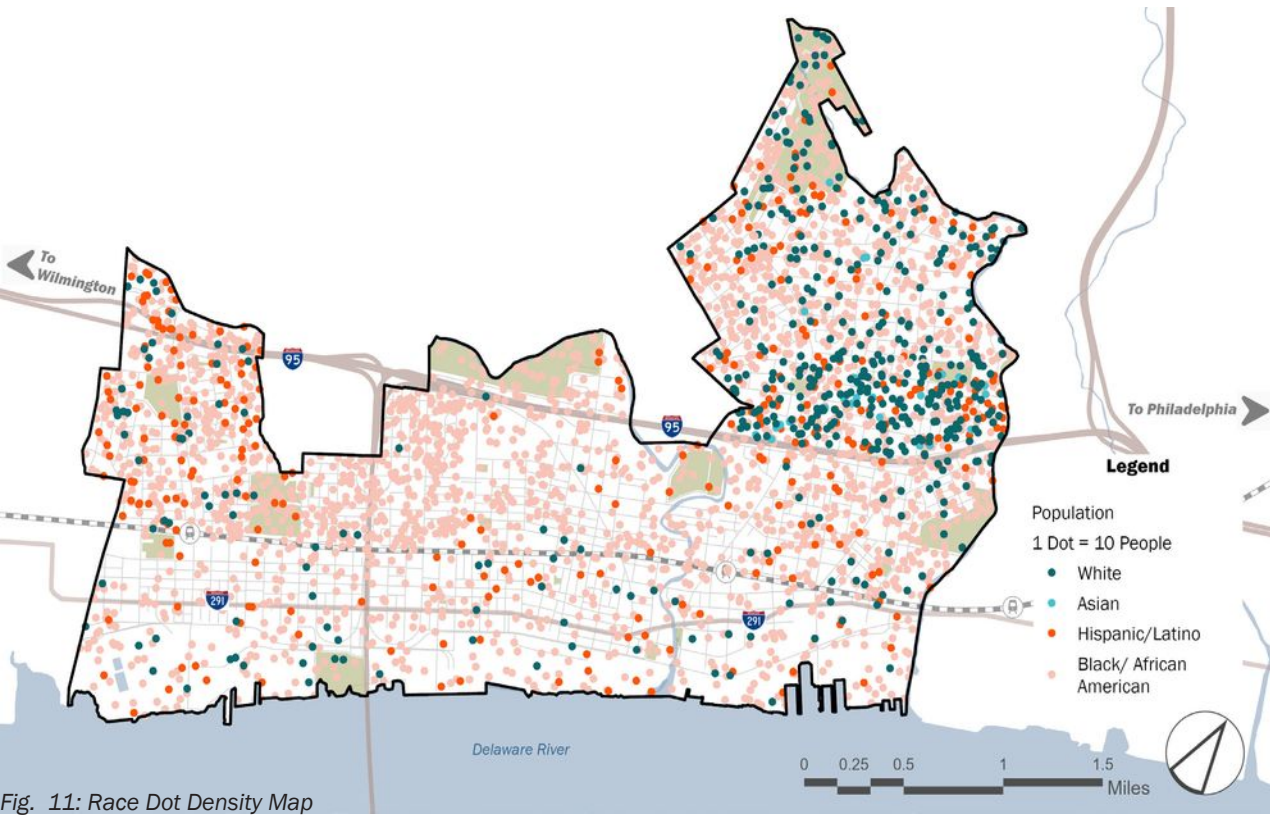
DEMOGRAPHICS

POPULATION

As of 2023, Chester’s population is 33,209 – half its 1950s peak of 66,039. After decades of steep decline, the city’s population has stabilized in recent years. From 2020 to 2023, Chester gained 604 residents. Looking forward, the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission (DVRPC) forecasts that Chester’s population will remain stable for the next 25 years: in 2050, according to its projections, the city will have 33,278 residents.

AGE & RACE

Chester is Pennsylvania’s largest majority-Black city. Nearly three-quarters of Chester residents are Black. The city’s Hispanic community, which is mostly Puerto Rican, has also experienced significant growth over the past two decades. Today, they account for one-tenth of the city’s total population. Chester’s white population, which after decades of decline has stabilized at 14%, is concentrated largely in the northeastern quadrant of the city, near Widener University.



 **33,278**

2050 DVRPC Population Projection

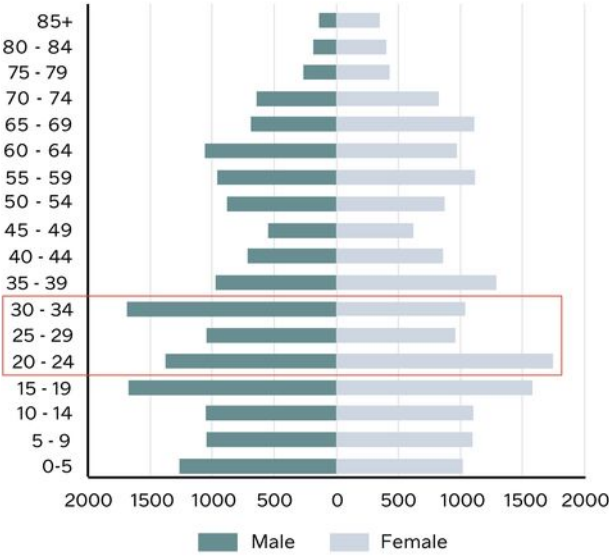


Fig. 12: Chester Population Pyramid

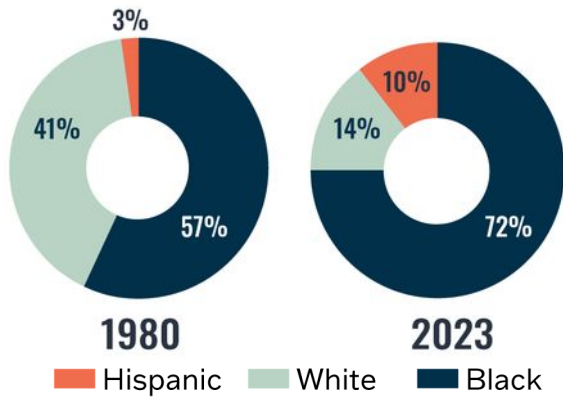


Fig. 13: Racial change in Chester between 1980 and 2023

EDUCATION

Chester residents’ educational attainment is low in comparison to residents of both Delaware County and nearby Philadelphia. Only 13% of residents have a bachelor’s degree or higher, while 14% of residents did not graduate from high school (Figure 14). In 2020, Chester had the sixth-lowest educational attainment of any incorporated community in Pennsylvania; it was the only urban municipality to make the list.

Likewise, K-12 educational institutions in Chester perform poorly compared to their neighbors in Delaware County and Philadelphia. The Chester-Upland School District contains 7 schools and approximately 3,100 students. Chester High School, the city’s flagship public high school, has a graduation rate of 43%, compared to 78% in Philadelphia and 88% in Delaware County (Figure 16). The number of students enrolled in the school district has declined by more than half since 2000, even as Chester’s overall population losses slowed. Today, there are approximately 5,000 students enrolled in two charter schools in the city. Chester Community Charter School, the larger of the two, was recently rocked by a child abuse scandal.

Nevertheless, Chester schools remain important sites of community. Chester High School’s homecoming is held downtown every year; local businesses and City Hall take part. The Chester High School basketball team, which has won eight state championships, is a source of local pride.

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

Chester is home to 65 different religious institutions which offer community banking, hot meals, and spiritual support for residents. The diversity and number of institutions is notable for such a small city, including a wide range of Christian churches (Episcopalian, Methodist, non-denominational, Spanish-speaking Pentecostal) as well as five mosques.



Fig. 14: Education Attainment Chart

- Bachelor's Degree or Higher
- High School Graduate, Some College, or Associate's Degree
- Below High School

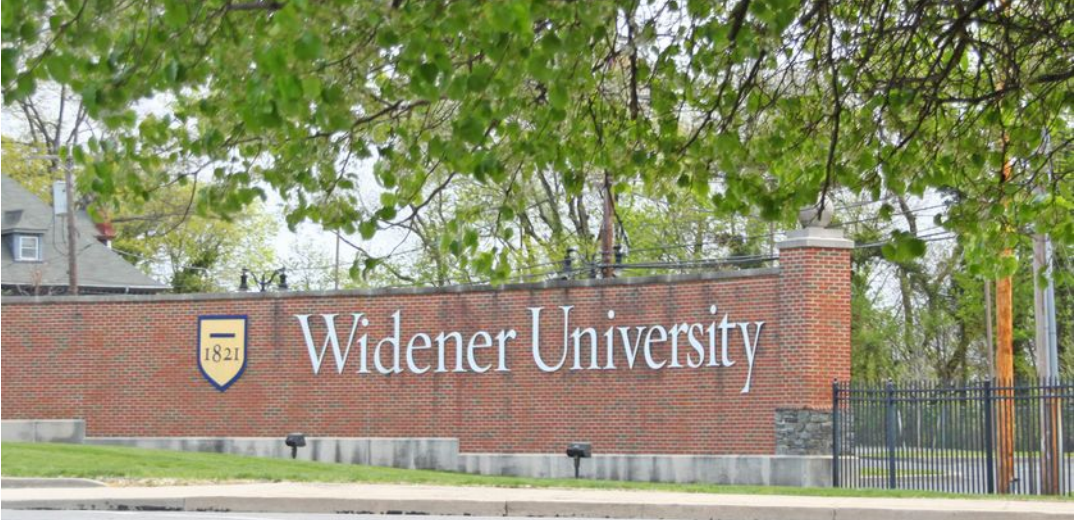


Fig. 15: Entrance to Widener University

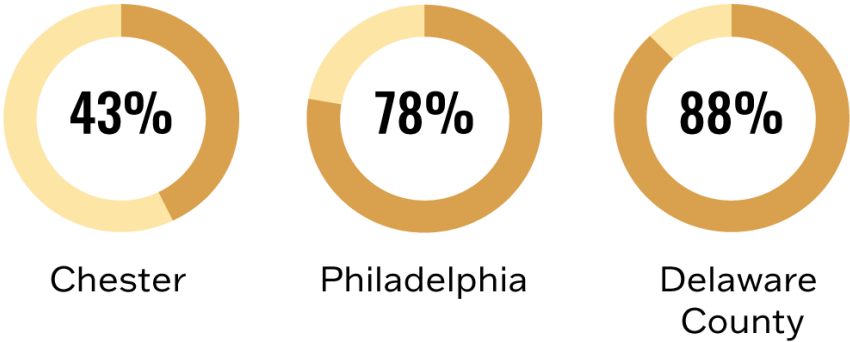


Fig. 16: Graduation Rates in Chester and nearby jurisdictions

POVERTY AND UNEMPLOYMENT

Nearly a third of Chester’s residents live in poverty, in a county and state where poverty rates are just 7% (Delaware County) and 8% (Pennsylvania). Likewise, incomes in Chester are very low. The median household income is \$39,000, significantly lower than Delaware County and Pennsylvania.

In 2023, 18% of Chester residents were unemployed. This was among the highest unemployment rates in the nation. During the same year, unemployment reached record lows below 4% in the nearby cities of Philadelphia and Wilmington, Delaware County, and Pennsylvania as a whole. Even as the region’s employment outlook has improved over the past several years, unemployment in Chester has continued to steadily rise. Despite Chester’s historic and contemporary role as a center of industry, a small and shrinking proportion of Chester residents work within city limits. Instead, the majority of employed residents commute to Philadelphia, Wilmington, and elsewhere in Delaware County.

We have residents who are eager, willing and have a strong desire to work and build careers to care for their families, but unfortunately, in the city of Chester, we do not have plentiful sustainable job opportunities... [Residents] have to leave Chester for gainful employment; however, due to the inability to pay for transportation, they miss out on opportunities.

– Kearni Warren, CEO of The Caregiver Society



Fig. 17: Labor flow chart

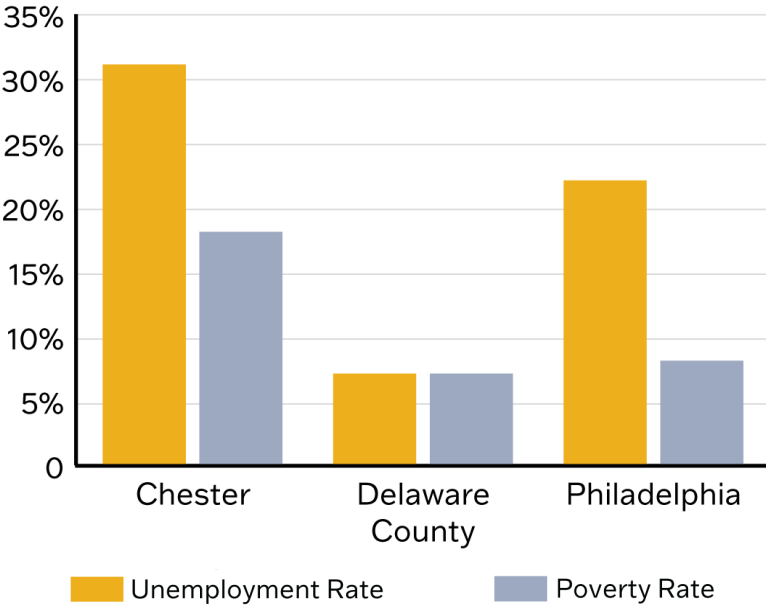


Fig. 18: Unemployment and poverty rate chart

ECONOMY

CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT

Once the heart of the city’s lively downtown, Chester’s central business district suffered major losses during the Eyre Park flood in 1972. As the city shrank, so did retail options for Chester’s remaining residents. Today, Chester’s central business district retail vacancy rate is 17% – more than triple the rate nationwide and 7 times the rate in nearby Philadelphia. Nonetheless, the central business district remains Chester’s cultural center, home to several restaurants, clothing stores, and event spaces. The Chester Made Collaborative and downtown Chester Cultural Arts & Technology Center provide space for community theater, dance, visual arts, and stilt-walking classes for youth and adults alike. As of 2025, there are at least five art galleries operating on Avenue of the States. Murals on the sides of buildings throughout the city display local artists’ work. New offices, including the local headquarters of two home health agencies, have also opened in recent years.



Fig. 19: Avenue of the States, a major downtown commercial corridor

OTHER COMMERCIAL DISTRICTS

In addition to the city’s historic downtown and waterfront area, Chester has several other important commercial corridors. Restaurants and businesses along Route 291 draw customers from throughout the region, and several new warehouses and commercial spaces are being developed in this area. Additionally, Third Street, Highland Avenue, 22nd Street, Edgemont Avenue, and Ninth Street are each the site of neighborhood-serving commercial institutions and have been previously identified as potential targets for corridor revitalization plans.



Fig. 20: A bank and hotel off the Edgemont Avenue corridor

WATERFRONT LANDOWNERS

Chester’s largest economic drivers, including the ReWorld Incinerator and Harrah’s Casino, are concentrated along the waterfront. Host fees collected from the casino and incinerator account for a third of Chester’s municipal budget, with Harrah’s required to pay at least \$10 million annually. However, these fees are no longer enough to keep the City afloat financially. In 2017, Chester signed a new deal substantially lowering incinerator host fees for waste produced in Delaware County; since then, the City has lost out on an estimated \$10 million in revenue. The casino now provides more than double the revenue of the incinerator annually.

Host fees: payments made to a host community by a developer for the right to site unwanted facilities, such as incinerators, within the community’s jurisdiction.



Fig. 21: ReWorld Incinerator

WATERFRONT REDEVELOPMENT

Subaru Park, home to the Philadelphia Union Major League Soccer team, opened in 2010. At the time, it was seen as a major investment in Chester that would help revive the city’s economy. The city updated its zoning ordinance in 2015 to help revitalize the waterfront and key commercial corridors with more mixed-use zoning and transit-oriented development and a special waterfront overlay. The initial Subaru Park proposal included large-scale mixed-use development along the Delaware River waterfront; however, this potential has not yet been fully realized. Only 17 games per season are played at home, and many Chester residents report skepticism that the stadium has changed Chester beyond game days.



Fig. 22: Exterior of Subaru Park

HOUSING



STOCK & VACANCY

Chester’s housing stock was largely constructed before World War II, with a steady decline in new housing additions over the following decades. Several new market-rate and mixed-use developments were constructed around Widener University in the 2010s to help address the need for student housing in the area, with another five-story development in progress as of 2024. There is also a new mixed-use development in progress in the heart of Chester’s downtown which will add new commercial space and 168 units of market-rate housing next to the Chester Transportation Center.

Chester is dominated by single-family homes, primarily rowhouses and semi-detached twins. There are few large multi-unit buildings, most of which are owned by the Chester Housing Authority (CHA). The city’s housing stock is in variable condition. Although the City has not completed a comprehensive housing stock assessment, it is widely understood that many homes need major structural repairs. The age of the housing stock means that many homes may lack modern energy efficiencies and an increasing number of residents are likely to face repair issues in the coming years. Nearly 1 in 5 households use oil to heat their homes, a common feature of older homes that have not been updated.

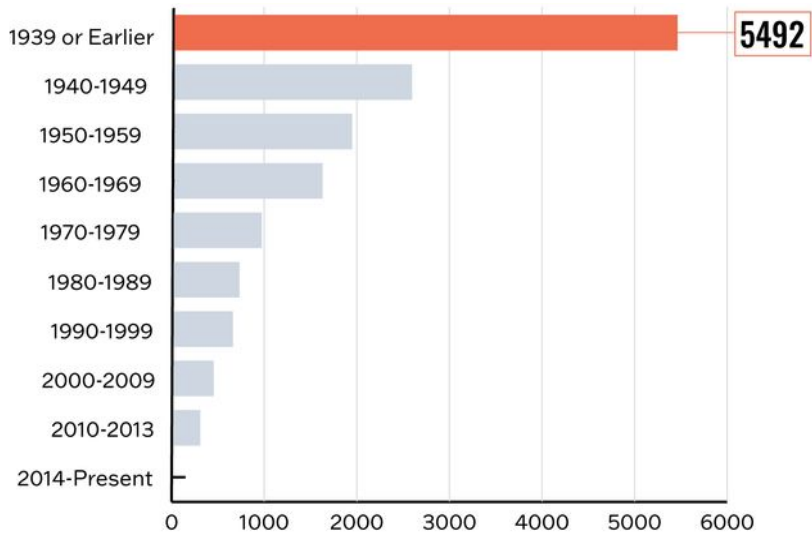


Fig. 23: Age of Chester’s housing stock

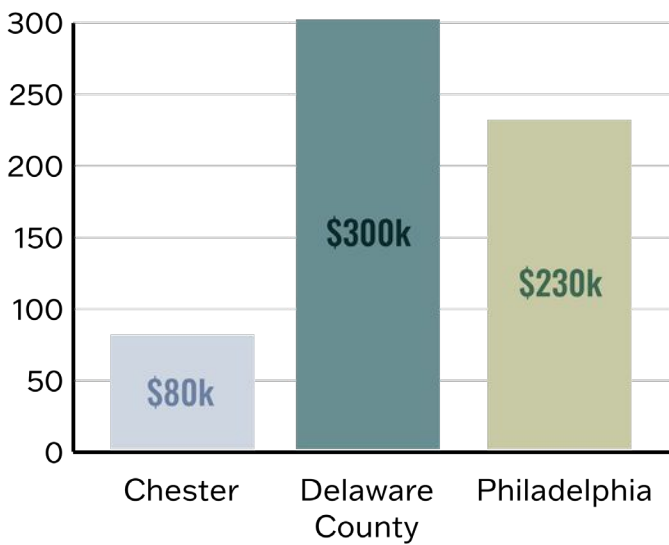


Fig. 24: Property values in Chester and comparison jurisdictions

DIVERSITY OF HOUSING TYPOLOGIES



Fig. 25: Multi-family Housing in Chester



Fig. 26: Single family home in Chester



Fig. 27: Rowhomes in Chester



Fig. 28: CHA senior apartments



Fig. 29: CHA rowhomes

AFFORDABILITY & VACANCY

Compared to the rest of Delaware County, housing in Chester is ample and relatively affordable. Chester’s property values are dramatically lower than elsewhere in Delaware County; the median property value is \$80,000, compared to \$300,000 in Delaware County. This is in large part due to the presence of the CHA, which constructs, manages, and sells property to low-income renters and first-time homebuyers. The CHA assists approximately 1,600 families through tenant-based rental assistance, project-based rental assistance, and homeownership programs. Although Chester remains a bubble of relative affordability in an increasingly expensive county, renters still face significant cost burdens.

Median rents in Chester range from \$800 to \$1,200, which is more than many residents can afford. The high numbers of residents who have moved to Chester since 2019 could likely indicate some level of housing insecurity, as high levels of mobility are common among very low-income renters.



TRANSPORTATION

TRANSPORTATION INFRASTRUCTURE

Chester’s geographic position and transportation infrastructure connect the city well to the greater Philadelphia region, Delaware, and New Jersey. However, the city’s transportation infrastructure also poses major challenges to neighborhood fabric and resident wellbeing. The I-95 segment that runs through Chester was completed in the 1960s; the construction process decimated an existing residential neighborhood. Over the past half century, Chester residents living alongside I-95 have had to contend with nonstop traffic noise – made worse by the absence of sound barriers – which has cracked the foundations of their homes and diminished their quality of life.

In addition to I-95, Commodore Barry Bridge and 21 rail bridges cut through Chester. These bridges also fragment neighborhoods, diminish walkability, and provide a constant barrage of noise.

CAR OWNERSHIP & COMMUTING

Chester residents’ median travel time to work is around 21 minutes. However, 15% of residents commute for 45 minutes or more. A third of Chester residents do not own a car, relying instead on carpooling and public transportation for daily trips.

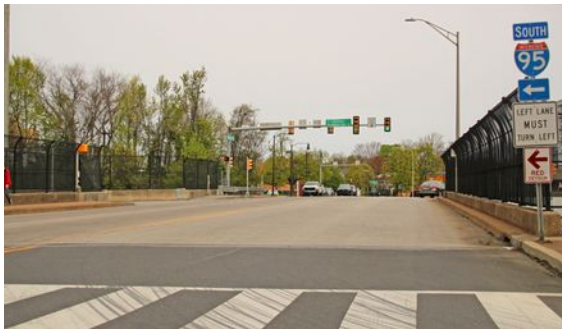
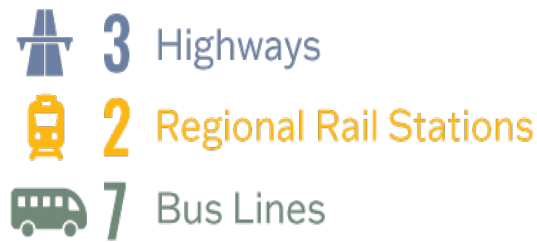


Fig. 30 (upper): Route 291
Fig. 31 (lower): I-95 intersection

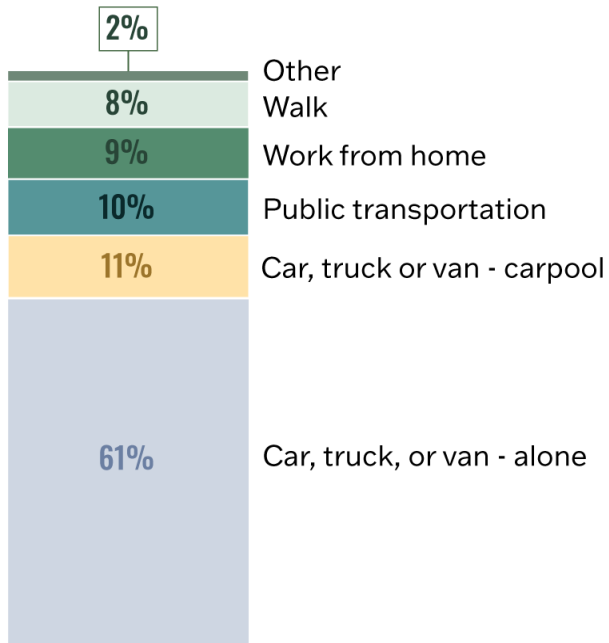


Fig. 32: Commuting Mode Share

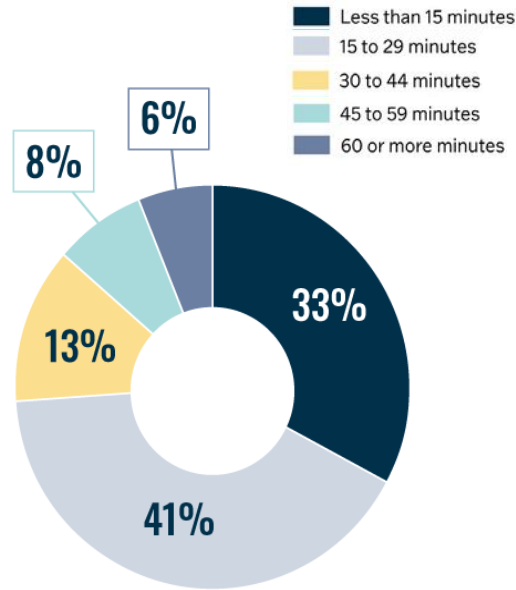


Fig. 33: Commuting Time Graphics



Fig. 34 (upper): Highland Ave Station
Fig. 35 (lower): SEPTA Bus



Fig. 36 (upper): Chester Transportation Center
Fig. 37 (lower): SEPTA Bus Stop

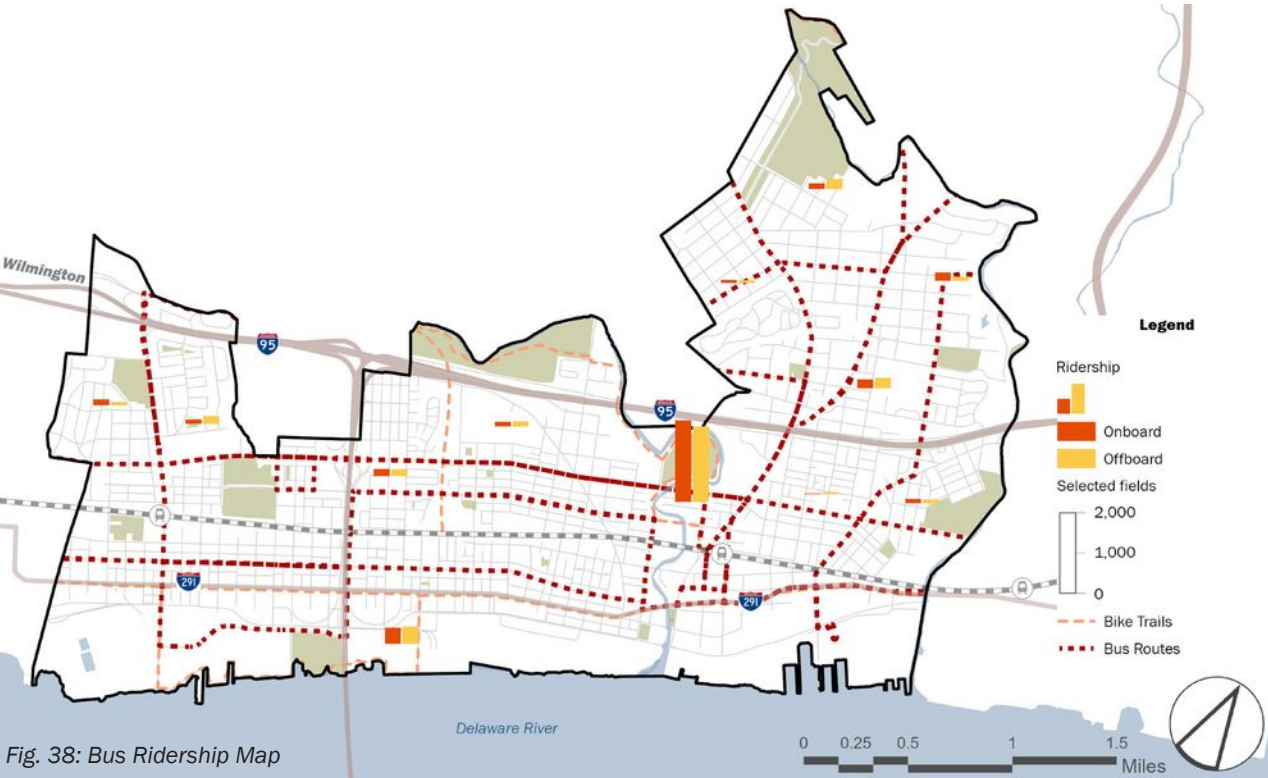


Fig. 38: Bus Ridership Map

PUBLIC TRANSIT

The Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority (SEPTA) serves as the primary public transportation provider for the City of Chester. 7 SEPTA bus routes connect Chester to South Philadelphia, the Philadelphia International Airport, and nearby neighborhoods in Delaware County. Bus ridership is unevenly distributed across different parts of the city; downtown and the waterfront have the highest ridership.

There are two SEPTA regional rail stations within Chester city limits: Chester Transportation Center and Highland Avenue. Both stations are served by the Wilmington/Newark Line, which operates on a one-hour frequency on weekdays and a two-hour frequency on weekends and holidays. Chester Transportation Center is the city’s primary transit hub, integrating rail with all seven of the city’s bus routes. Amtrak uses the rail line but does not stop in Chester.

On April 10, 2025, SEPTA announced proposed service cuts due to a major budget shortfall. These cuts are poised to hit Chester especially hard. If the cuts went into effect, by August 2025, the Wilmington/Newark Regional Rail line would run only every two hours, and it would no longer offer service at night, on weekends, or during peak commuting hours. By January 2026, the Wilmington/Newark line would shut down entirely, and all but one of the city’s bus routes would face service cuts of 20% – leading to wait times of 30 minutes or longer even during peak hours.

ACCESS & SAFETY CHALLENGES



Sidewalk coverage, a key measure of pedestrian safety, varies widely within Chester’s residential neighborhoods. Though most neighborhoods have sufficient sidewalk coverage, they are often not well maintained. The waterfront and parks often lack sidewalks altogether, creating unsafe conditions for pedestrians. Chester has an average walk score of 60, meaning that the city is somewhat walkable, but many routine errands require a car.

Walk score: a number between zero and 100 that measures pedestrian friendliness based on walking distance to amenities, population density, and road and intersection safety.



Fig. 39: Sidewalk in residential neighborhood



Fig. 40: Sidewalk in downtown Chester

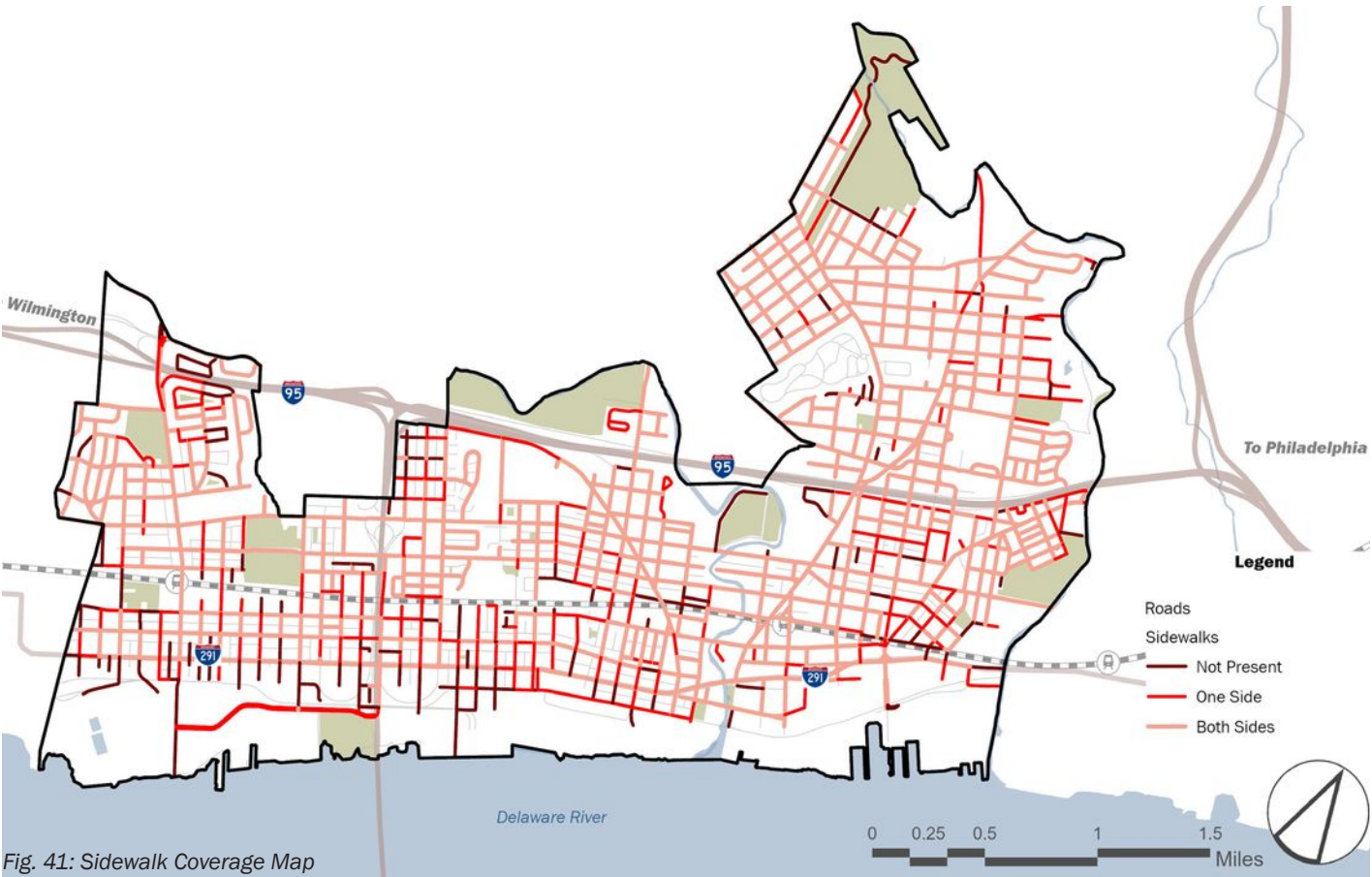


Fig. 41: Sidewalk Coverage Map

ENVIRONMENT

PARKS & TRAILS

Chester has 10 parks distributed across the city’s 4.8 square miles. Veterans Memorial Park, in the center of the city, hosts much of the community’s programming. Deshong Park, on the edge of downtown Chester, has largely fallen into disrepair since the art museum on its grounds was closed in the 1980s. Although these parks could be a great resource for the public, years of deferred maintenance have left them in generally poor condition.

The Delaware River waterfront is also an important component of Chester’s overall recreation landscape. As of 2022, the East Coast Greenway, a walking and biking route stretching 3,000 miles from Maine to Florida, extends through Chester’s waterfront. However, waterfront parks and trails remain largely inaccessible, fragmented by several industrial sites and Commodore Barry Bridge, and cut off from Chester’s residential neighborhoods by Route 291.



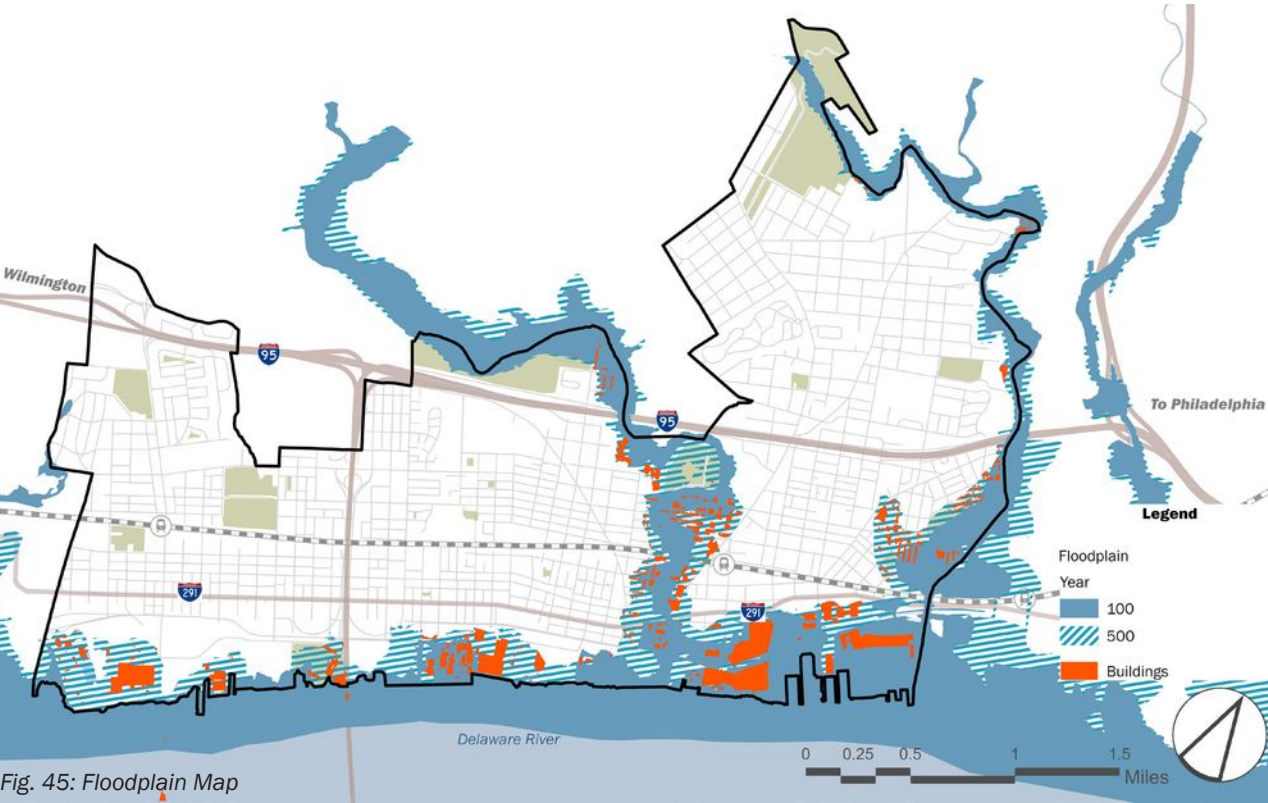
Fig. 42: Park and Trail Map



Fig. 43: Eyre Park



Fig. 44: Deshong Park



POLLUTION

Chester’s waterfront industries are a major source of pollution. The ReWorld incinerator contributes to extremely poor air quality by burning 3,510 tons of waste every day. ReWorld takes in waste from different cities along the East Coast, primarily from New York, New Jersey, and Philadelphia – only 1.8% of the trash it burns originates in Chester. Illegal dumping is also common, leading to high levels of trash and pollutants in the city’s parks, public lands, and Chester Creek.



Fig. 46: Chester Creek

CLIMATE RISK

The city’s waterfront access is further complicated by the reality that Chester’s industrial waterfront, central business district, and 586 homes sit within the 100-year floodplain. As a result of climate change, Chester will become increasingly impacted by sea level rise and tidal flooding along the waterfront and Chester Creek, which could threaten downtown businesses. The Delaware River is rising about an inch per decade and sea level rise in the Philadelphia region is projected to rise 14 to 19 inches by the 2050s. The Delaware County Regional Water Authority’s wastewater treatment plant, which processes 44 million gallons of wastewater daily from across the region, is located next to the incinerator in the 500-year floodplain. Although the facility has a floodwall which provides some protection, the facility discharges raw sewage as part of a Combined Sewage Overflow system during major storms.

Climate change is also driving temperature changes that will negatively impact residents. Chester is already one of the most vulnerable communities in Delaware County to extreme heat, according to an analysis by DVRPC. By 2050, temperatures could increase by 4.1 to 5.8 degrees, and the frequency and intensity of heat waves is also projected to increase; there could be as many as 50 extreme heat days per year. Living through extreme heat for nearly 10% of the year will put Chester’s vulnerable residents at elevated risk of heat stress and related illnesses, increase air conditioning needs, and increase utility bills that residents already struggle to afford.

PUBLIC HEALTH

CHRONIC DISEASES

Air pollution contributes to major public health hazards for Chester’s residents, including higher rates of respiratory and heart disease. 27% of Chester’s children have asthma, a rate three times higher than the state average. Children are more likely to go to the emergency room and to miss school due to asthma issues, exacerbating educational disparities and potentially causing their caretakers to miss work. Additionally, the prevalence of diabetes in Chester is nearly 18%, 7 percentage points higher than the state average.

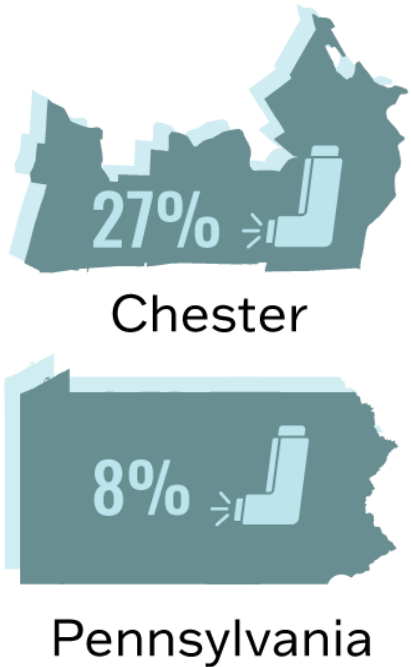


Fig. 47: Asthma rates in Chester

FOOD ACCESS

Chester is classified as a food desert. The city has just one full-service grocery store: Cousin’s Fresh Market, located on West 9th Street, in the western section of the city. The store offers SNAP recipients coupons for free fresh fruits and vegetables with every produce purchase. In other sections of the city, residents primarily shop for food at corner stores and dollar stores, where access to fresh produce is more limited. There are also six food pantries within city limits, which distribute fresh food and grocery products to residents in need from Monday through Thursday. However, availability is somewhat limited, as only two pantries are open after 4pm.



Fig. 48: Cousin’s Grocery Store on West 9th Street

GUN VIOLENCE

Although Chester has historically been a hotspot for violence, the Chester Partnership for Safe Neighborhoods, launched by the Delaware County District Attorney’s Office in 2020 in partnership with local anti-violence organizations, has been credited with substantially reducing gun violence. Between 2020 and 2024, gun homicides decreased by 68%, gun violence incidents decreased by 65%, and non-fatal shootings decreased by 64%. Local community groups like the Chester Community Coalition provide trauma-informed support services to individuals and families impacted by violence, particularly gun violence.

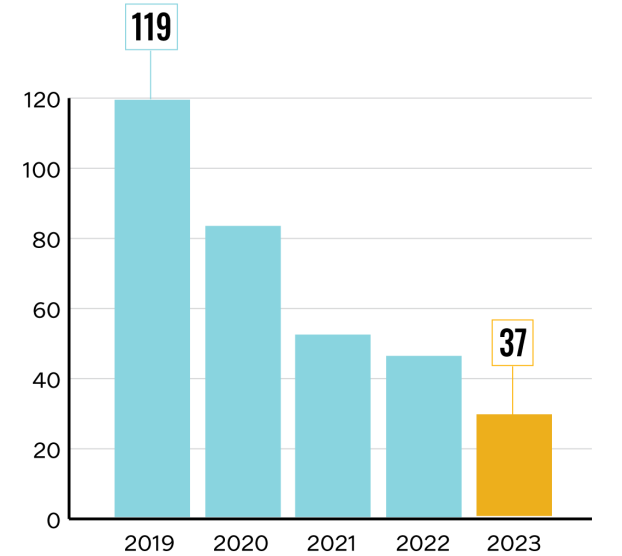


Fig. 49: Gun violence incidents in Chester (2019-2023)

POLITICAL CONTEXT

RELATIONSHIP WITH DELAWARE COUNTY

Chester is the poorest municipality in Delaware County, and the relationship between the city and the county has often been a contentious one. At the height of the War on Poverty, the county’s powerful Republican machine appropriated the vast majority of aid intended for Chester’s poorest residents. In the 1980s, Chester’s first Black mayor fought fiercely with county leaders, who opposed the placement of an incinerator on Chester’s waterfront. A community group, Concerned Citizens to Save Chester, formed to express Black residents’ support of the incinerator plan, which they understood as the best chance to address the city’s deep poverty and declining tax base. Delaware County opposition to establishing an incinerator in Chester was widely received by city residents and leaders as the latest in a long line of attempts by the wealthier, whiter county to marginalize the poorer, Blacker city.

Over the past 35 years, important political shifts have taken place in Chester and Delaware County. New partnerships between city and county officials and residents have been highly successful – none more so than the Chester Partnership for Safe Neighborhoods. However, points of tension remain. Rising home prices across Delaware County have both benefitted and harmed Chester. The city’s housing affordability has attracted new residents from elsewhere in the county, stabilizing the population for the first time in decades. But it has also deepened the ghettoization of poor Delaware County residents within Chester city limits. Today, as outlined on page 19, the city hosts the majority of subsidized housing units in the county, but it doesn’t receive its fair share of resources from the county in exchange.

FIGHT FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

Widespread opposition to the incinerator emerged only in the years after operations began. Chester Residents Concerned for Quality Living (CRCQL, pronounced “circle”) was established in 1992 to fight polluting industries in Chester, including the incinerator. CRCQL filed the first environmental racism lawsuit in the country in May 1996, alleging that the opening of new waste facilities in Chester constituted a violation of the Civil Rights Act. Though the case was eventually declared moot by the Supreme Court, it served as a blueprint for other environmental justice organizations around the country. In the years since, opposition to the incinerator gained steam as the facility’s health impacts became clear and the City’s financial challenges deepened.



Fig. 50: Chester Lives Matter sign



Fig. 51: CRCQL “Let Us Breathe” yard sign along Route 291

BANKRUPTCY

In 1995, Chester was designated a financially distressed municipality under Pennsylvania Act 47. This designation compelled Chester to engage in a recovery program in conjunction with the state until it could meet its financial obligations while providing critical government services. In an effort to spur economic development, Chester leaders welcomed a variety of new facilities to the city, from a state prison, which opened in 1998, to Harrah’s Casino, which broke ground in 2006. However, Chester’s financial health continued to deteriorate. By 2020, one-third of the city’s workforce had been furloughed, \$40 million was owed in past-due pension payments, and vital services for residents were not being provided. A state of financial emergency was declared, and a state-appointed receiver took over the City’s finances. Two years later, the City filed for Chapter 9 bankruptcy.

Today, though the City has yet to emerge from bankruptcy, it is in better financial health. Chester’s 2025 budget included no layoffs or service cuts and the police pension fund has nearly three years of savings. Improvements have also been made to public works and tax revenue collection.

LEADERSHIP CHANGES

Chester’s political machine was successfully challenged in the 2023 mayoral election, in which City Council member Stefan Roots won an overwhelming victory against longtime mayor Thaddeus Kirkland. Mayor Roots is a longtime CRCQL member and championed gun violence prevention as a City Council member. Since becoming mayor, he has launched a neighborhood block captain program, expanded programs to fight illegal dumping and clear abandoned vehicles, and prioritized greater connectivity between the city’s historic downtown and university district.



Fig. 52: View of Chester neighborhood from I-95 pedestrian overpass

ISSUES & OPPORTUNITIES



ISSUES
OPPORTUNITIES

Issues

- 1. MUNICIPAL FISCAL CHALLENGES
- 2. POOR CONDITION OF HOUSING STOCK
- 3. LIMITED ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES
- 4. TRANSPORTATION DIVIDES NEIGHBORHOODS
- 5. POOR PUBLIC HEALTH
- 6. GROWING CLIMATE RISK
- 7. POOR PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS
- 8. OBSTACLES TO WATERFRONT REDEVELOPMENT

- 1. DEEPLY ENGAGED COMMUNITY
- 2. AMPLE & AFFORDABLE HOUSING
- 3. TRAINING-READY LABOR FORCE
- 4. PROXIMITY TO WIDENER UNIVERSITY
- 5. MULTIMODAL TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS
- 6. ROBUST PARK SPACE
- 7. PHILADELPHIA UNION AS AN ANCHOR INSTITUTION

Opportunities

ISSUES

1. MUNICIPAL FISCAL CHALLENGES

Once the economic hub of Delaware County, commercial activity in Chester declined steadily as a result of deindustrialization. With high vacancy rates downtown and along the waterfront, as well as declining industrial host fees, Chester has faced a series of financial crises that culminated in the city filing for bankruptcy in 2020. As a poor, majority Black city, Chester has also been politically and economically marginalized by whiter and wealthier Delaware County communities. And the city has weathered major political scandals that have further eroded residents’ trust in government.

2. POOR CONDITION OF HOUSING STOCK

The majority of homes in Chester are 75 years old or older and many need major repairs, while others are entirely uninhabitable. Maintenance is frequently deferred by landlords, some of whom are financially unable to manage upkeep on their properties and others who simply chose not to do so, impacting the majority of residents who rent.

3. LIMITED ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITIES

Chester residents experience among the highest rates of poverty and unemployment in the region, and very few people who live in Chester are able to find work within city limits. Many residents who are interested in opening their own businesses — which could help reduce commercial vacancy and revitalize Chester’s downtown — lack the necessary start-up capital.



Fig. 53: Boarded-up businesses in downtown Chester



Fig. 54: Chester’s housing stock is in variable condition and old homes may need repairs

4. TRANSPORTATION DIVIDES NEIGHBORHOODS

Although Chester’s transportation network connects it well to the broader region, aging infrastructure impacts intra-city transit options, walkability, access, and safety. More than a quarter of residents do not own a car, and public transit options within Chester are unreliable. I-95, Route 291, and the Amtrak and SEPTA rail lines create substantial barriers that fragment neighborhoods.

5. POOR PUBLIC HEALTH

Chester residents experience high rates of chronic disease, a result of the combined effects of poverty, limited fresh food access, poor maintenance of green spaces, and pollution from industrial sites. Life expectancy in Chester is nine years lower than the national average, further evidence of the compounding effects of poverty and chronic disease.

6. GROWING CLIMATE RISK

Without action, Chester will become increasingly impacted by sea level rise and tidal flooding along the Delaware River and Chester Creek, which could impact waterfront developments and downtown businesses. Rising temperatures and growing numbers of heat waves will put additional stress on Chester residents and infrastructure.

7: POOR PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS

Though crime rates have fallen dramatically in recent years, Chester continues to be viewed by neighboring communities as a hotspot of drug use and gun violence. Visible smoke plumes from the incinerator and other industrial sites further deter potential visitors and residents. And too often, Chester serves as a dumping ground for other communities’ waste, with most illegal dumping offenders coming from outside the city.



Fig. 55: Neighborhood fragmentation map showing the physical division of the city into 11 fragments, separated by highways, rail bridges, and natural barriers that obstruct pedestrian travel



Fig. 56: Common search terms for Chester, which are overwhelmingly negative and not reflective of current conditions on the ground

8. OBSTACLES TO WATERFRONT REDEVELOPMENT

Chester’s waterfront has attracted outsized attention from outside the city. Particularly in the wake of Subaru Park’s construction in 2010, planners and developers promised large-scale, mixed-use development along the waterfront. However, actual waterfront development has been slow to arrive and modest in scale, hindered by financial obstacles, resident skepticism, and the presence of the incinerator.

”
All of our efforts of economic development
will not succeed if Covanta is still there...
We can have fancy, multi-use development
envisioned for that coastline and investors
are going to continue to turn away because
of Covanta.

– Elaine Schaefer, Delaware County Council Member



Fig. 57: Industrial sites along Chester’s waterfront.

OPPORTUNITIES

1. DEEPLY ENGAGED COMMUNITY

Despite the complexity and range of challenges facing Chester, its residents are working hard to improve the city. A variety of nonprofit advocacy groups have fought for improved air quality, helped reduce gun violence, and built up a creative arts scene in the city. Over 65 religious institutions and several nonprofit community centers provide social services like food pantries, jobs training, and mental health support groups.

2. AMPLE AND AFFORDABLE HOUSING

Chester is an oasis of affordability in the heart of an increasingly expensive county. Today, Chester is the site of more than half of Delaware County’s subsidized housing stock, and more than a quarter of Delaware County voucher holders live in Chester.

3. TRAINING-READY LABOR FORCE

Chester’s largest population group is working-age adults, who city leaders have described as eager to find good work closer to home. Chester-Upland High School, the Chester Education Foundation, and Delaware County Community College have existing training and internship programs in subjects ranging from IT and marketing to automotive technology and cosmetology



Fig. 58: Protest of the incinerator on Earth Day 2023.



Fig. 59: Culinary vocational training in Chester. Source: Chester Education Foundation.

4. PROXIMITY TO WIDENER UNIVERSITY

Widener’s proximity to Chester’s downtown means the university is well-situated to establish a commercial corridor that can help revitalize the city’s tax base and provide new employment opportunities. The university has a robust nursing program, which trains a large number of healthcare workers in and around Chester. Widener now guarantees any Chester High School graduate who meets admissions requirements a four-year scholarship of at least \$100,000 dollars.

5. MULTIMODAL TRANSPORTATION OPTIONS

The wide range of transportation options connecting Chester to the rest of Delaware County, Philadelphia, and Wilmington make it possible to access employment opportunities throughout the region, with or without a car.

6. ROBUST PARK SPACE

Chester has ten parks within 4.8 square miles. Existing recreation spaces – including tennis courts, basketball courts, and a public pool – are well used by residents. Additionally, the East Coast Greenway bike trail, which stretches from Florida to Maine along the Atlantic Coast, passes through Chester along the waterfront.



Fig. 60: A stretch of I-95 that cuts through Chester.



Fig. 61: View from the Chester Transportation Center Regional Rail station.

7. PHILADELPHIA UNION AS AN ANCHOR INSTITUTION

The Philadelphia Union’s presence in Chester has not yet yielded significant benefits for residents. But in the team’s second decade in Chester, it is poised to make a bigger difference to the city’s economic wellbeing. Game attendance has skyrocketed since 2022, drawing crowds from Delaware County, New Jersey, Delaware, and Philadelphia. Facilities at Subaru Park are expanding and the Union have verbally committed to staying in Chester for the long haul.



Fig. 62: Philadelphia Union logo



Fig. 63: Game day at Subaru Park.

GOALS & VISION



PLANNING CONTEXT

VISION

GOALS

PLANNING CONTEXT

PRIOR PLANS IN CHESTER

Chester has been described as an “overplanned” community: the city has been the subject of 18 plans in the past decade, many of which have put forward transformative solutions to the city’s challenges that have failed to materially improve the lives of residents, if not failed to materialize entirely.

Though projects proposed in the 2020 Waterfront Master Plan and the 2023 City Comprehensive Plan serve as the basis for several goals and recommendations below, prior planning efforts in Chester have generally fallen short on two levels. First, they have focused too much on the waterfront to the exclusion of other parts of the city, without fully reckoning with the obstacle that polluting industrial sites pose to waterfront development. Second, they have faced significant financial and capacity obstacles to implementation.

As a result of these shortcomings, residents have become understandably jaded with the planning process. This plan aims to address disengagement and distrust:

- 1. By grounding **all** recommendations in the vision of improving the lives of Chester residents, particularly those who have historically faced barriers to housing, health, and economic security.
- 2. By focusing explicitly on government accountability and identifying opportunities for city agencies to partner with trusted community organizations.

WHY PLAN FOR 2050?

Chester’s receiver anticipates that the city will emerge from bankruptcy by 2028. This plan includes a number of recommendations that can be implemented over the next three years to ensure that Chester move forward from bankruptcy on strong footing. It also includes recommendations that will take longer – up to 25 years – to come to fruition. Chester’s long legacy of disinvestment and ongoing financial challenges mean that the city needs a longer runway to effectively launch on a new path of growth and transformation.

WHY INCLUDE COMMUNITY & PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS?

At the conclusion of each goal is a section laying out opportunities for collaboration with community organizations and local institutions. Collaboration will enable the plan’s success on multiple levels:

- 1. By encouraging Chester’s largest landowners, including Widener University and the Philadelphia Union, to truly take on the role of anchor institutions;
- 2. By deepening relationships between community organizations and city government, building trust and accountability;
- 3. And by expanding the reach of the planning process beyond what the City of Chester, which has very limited funding and capacity, can accomplish on its own.

VISION

By 2050, Chester is a vibrant waterfront city where residents, workers, and visitors come together to work, play, and pray. The city’s governance and finances are stable; its physical and social infrastructure is repaired; its residents and neighborhoods are connected; and it is a regional economic and recreational hub.

GOALS



STABILIZE

Stabilize Chester’s finances & governance

With fiscal recovery on the horizon and new political leadership, city leaders have the opportunity to ensure the long-term stability of Chester’s finances and government, and Chester’s residents are clearly invested in helping make these efforts a success. **This goal is focused on stabilizing Chester’s finances and government with transparent communication, good governance practices, and accountability.** This goal also aims to ensure the city’s long-term financial health by addressing vacant land and rebalancing the city’s relationship with waterfront landowners.

A key component of this goal is positioning Chester to no longer be financially reliant on heavily polluting waterfront industries. From an equity perspective, this is necessary to ensure environmental justice for Chester’s residents, who suffer disproportionately from asthma and a variety of cancers as a result of air pollution. If the city’s local economy is no longer dependent on heavily polluting industries, particularly the incinerator, new redevelopment opportunities – and revenue streams – will likely be unlocked for Chester.



REPAIR

Require housing & legacy of disinvestment

Decades of declining employment and limited lending opportunities have resulted in high rates of poverty, unemployment, and commercial vacancy in Chester. Widener’s proximity to the commercial district along with recent milestones in the university’s relationship with the city – including guaranteed scholarships for Chester High School graduates – are a potential mobilizing force for new business development and reinvestment in Chester’s residents and downtown commercial district. **This goal is focused on repairing the city’s housing stock and building new mixed income and market rate housing, as well as addressing the legacy of economic disinvestment that has contributed to high rates of poverty and unemployment in the city.**

This goal advances equity by increasing small and minority-owned businesses’ access to start-up and scale-up capital. Likewise, investing in residents through training programs and workforce development will help build intergenerational wealth, a key component of achieving a more equitable future for Chester’s residents.



CONNECT

Connect neighborhoods & improve quality of life

Chester’s post-war transportation projects resulted in substantial home demolitions, visibly disrupting neighborhoods and suppressing property values. With poor public health and growing climate risks, the city’s environment can be harmful for residents. **This goal is focused on reconnecting Chester’s neighborhoods and social fabric, which have been physically and socially fragmented by infrastructure over the years.** This goal focuses on strengthening community identity through placemaking, improving safety, and cleaning up Chester’s public spaces.

By investing in reconnecting Chester’s people and places after roads and bridges divided them, this goal helps achieve a healthier, safer, and more equitable future for residents.



TRANSFORM

Transform Chester into a regional destination

Chester was once the economic hub of Delaware County. This goal is focused on enabling the City to once again become a regional economic and recreational hub. Chester has made great strides in recent years in reducing gun violence, and recent commitments made by the Philadelphia Union demonstrate that the city is poised for new growth and opportunities. However, transformative redevelopment along the waterfront and future opportunities for economic development will not be possible without a change in public perceptions of Chester in the broader region.

This final goal depends in part on the closure of the incinerator, which will allow the city to attract new forms of commercial development along the waterfront and create new programming and amenities for current and future residents. Ensuring residents have equitable access to the waterfront’s natural resources and urban amenities is paramount so it does not turn into a playground exclusively for visitors.

RECOMMENDATIONS



RECOMMENDATION GUIDE

STABILIZE

REPAIR

CONNECT

TRANSFORM



STABILIZE

POLICIES

- S-1.1 Establish transparent and centralized municipal communication.
- S-1.2 Create Youth, Senior, and other Advisory Councils to incorporate community voices into municipal decision-making.
- S-1.3 Negotiate Good Neighbor and Community Benefit Agreements.

PROGRAMS

- S-2.1 Hold neighborhood Budget 101 workshops in partnership with community organizations.
- S-2.2 Establish Chester Community Grant program to fund community-driven initiatives.
- S-2.3 Establish community land bank and training-based land care program to help assess and manage vacant land.

PROJECTS

- S-3.1 Prepare to shut down incinerator by 2045.



REPAIR

- R-1.1 Build on existing programs to increase access to affordable and high-quality housing.
- R-1.2 Update zoning to allow more mixed-use housing, expedite permits and approvals near commercial and transit corridors, and reward density.
- R-1.3 Streamline small business permitting process.

- R-2.1 Launch a Rent-to-Own pilot program
- R-2.2 Establish centralized business resource center
- R-2.3 Partner with a CDFI to finance business development.
- R-2.4 Expand vocational and medical training programs.
- R-2.5 Establish Corridor Improvement District.

- R-3.1 Create interactive street space under Chester Transit Center bridge.
- R-3.2 Redevelop Deshong Park.
- R-3.3 Activate Ethel Waters Park.



CONNECT

- C-1.1 Aggressively pursue illegal dumping offenders and clean up waste in parks and public spaces.

- C-2.1 Expand block captain program to strengthen community and neighborhood identity through placemaking.
- C-2.2 Establish urban tree canopy and shade structures program to address extreme heat vulnerability.
- C-2.3 Increase access to flood adaptation funding and flood insurance.

- C-3.1 Redesign major roads to improve safety for pedestrians, cyclists, and transit users.
- C-3.2 Relocate Highland Ave Regional Rail station to Engle Street.



TRANSFORM

- T-1.1 Obtain grant-writing support for plan implementation funding.

- T-2.1 Create positive publicity campaign in partnership with local leaders, neighborhood block captains, and community groups.
- T-2.2 Plan festivals, clean ups, runs, and other events beyond game day at Subaru Park.
- T-2.3 Establish intracity bus service to enhance community mobility.

- T-3.1 Build on existing waterfront office space and attract new commercial tenants.
- T-3.2 Make the waterfront more welcoming to residents and visitors.
- T-3.3 Establish waterfront education center with community fishing, youth leadership program, and mussel hatchery.

RECOMMENDATION GUIDE

We have organized each goal’s recommendations under the categories of Policies, Programs, and Projects.

1. POLICIES

Policies are recommendations involving ordinances, municipal policy positions, and good governance practices which can typically be completed in a relatively short amount of time and with limited resources.

2. PROGRAMS

Programs are recommendations that organize, streamline, or create new funds or programs to support Chester’s residents and small businesses; they require varying levels of time and funding depending on if the program is a new pilot, an expansion of an existing program, or requires staffing. Programs should be developed with feedback from residents and may operate in partnership with local community groups or regional governmental agencies.

3. PROJECTS

Projects are generally larger and more time intensive recommendations that require significant investments in Chester’s public infrastructure and/or municipal capacity. Projects should be designed and implemented in partnership with residents through an iterative process of community engagement, and will likely need funding support through grants and anchor institutional partners alongside city resources.

Each recommendation includes a list of proposed **Implementation Partners** as well as projected needs for **Funding**, potential **Funding Sources**, and the estimated **Time** required for implementation.

COST GUIDE



UNDER \$25,000



UNDER \$100,000



UNDER \$500,000



OVER \$500,000

TIME GUIDE



SHORT: 1-3 YEARS



MEDIUM: 3-10 YEARS



LONG: 10-25 YEARS

A complete implementation timeline for the proposed recommendations can be found in the Implementation chapter.



STABILIZE

S-1.1 Establish transparent and centralized municipal communication.

City officials can take several inexpensive but meaningful steps to ensure transparent and centralized communication. They should establish a 311 non-emergency phone number and online ticketing system to put Chester on equal footing with other small cities in Pennsylvania, including Harrisburg, Scranton, and Upper Darby, each of which has begun offering 311 services in recent years. Residents will be able to use 311 to report illegal dumping and abandoned vehicles, find warming and cooling centers, request the information they need to apply for a business license or building permit, pay bills owed to the city, and more.

The City should also establish a weekly newsletter to publicize city and community events and highlight local news items. Additionally, they should regularly update government websites, which currently display inconsistent and out-of-date information, and standardize the streaming of public meetings and hearings on Facebook Live. Finally, they should share quarterly plan progress updates on the newsletter, social media, and the City’s website to demonstrate the plan’s momentum and encourage accountability.

TIME
Short
COST
Under \$25,000
PARTNERSHIP
Mayor’s Office/City Council, Chester Senior Center, Chester-Upland School District
FUNDING SOURCE
Public Affairs Dept.

S-1.2 Create Youth, Senior, and other Advisory Councils to incorporate community voices into municipal decision-making.

Chester currently has a Shade Tree Commission and Block Captain program but can do more to engage residents in local government. City officials should incorporate community input into the municipal decision-making process in a more sustained way through Youth, Senior, and other Advisory councils. These councils will provide platforms to engage and incorporate youth, seniors and other key affinity groups into priority-setting and decision-making that directly affects them – helping build trust, transparency, and accountability between residents and local government for a more inclusive and equitable community.

TIME
Short
COST
Under \$25,000
PARTNERSHIP
Mayor’s Office/City Council, Public Safety Dept.
FUNDING SOURCE
Public Affairs Dept., Public Safety Dept.



S-1.3 Negotiate Good Neighbor and Community Benefit Agreements.

In 2024, Chester’s City Council passed a Community Benefits Ordinance requiring that all new development projects receiving city assistance must provide tangible benefits to residents. The ordinance is an important step forward for the City, which has historically not done enough to ensure that new commercial and industrial development benefits residents. Now, to ensure that the CBA process truly engages residents and extracts meaningful concessions from developers, the City should appoint local leaders, including environmental justice advocates, to an oversight committee to negotiate CBAs. Committee members should hold public engagement sessions to learn what residents want from each proposed CBA and widely disseminate information about potential benefits, including example CBAs from other cities.

Additionally, since CBAs apply only to new development, the City should extract formal commitments from existing landowners – including Harrah’s Casino, the Kimberly-Clark Paper Mill, Subaru Park, and the ReWorld Incinerator – through Good Neighbor Agreements. Each of these landowners have expressed some level of commitment to the city and its residents. However, in the case of the incinerator and other industrial sites, their everyday activities pose material risk to Chester residents’ health without providing much economic benefit. The city should put sustained pressure on these landowners to come to the negotiating table and sign Good Neighbor Agreements to reduce environmental harms and increase benefits to Chester residents. Potential CBA commitments that could meaningfully benefit Chester residents include:

TIME

Medium

COST

\$

\$

\$

\$

Under \$25,000

PARTNERSHIP

Delaware County Solid Waste Authority, City Council, Mayor’s Office, Community Organization Oversight Committee (TBE)

Community Benefit Agreements (CBAs) are legally binding agreements between developers or landowners and community groups, which shift historically unbalanced power dynamics and can help ensure that residents impacted by land use decisions are not negatively impacted. CBAs commonly include pledges to hire a certain percentage of local employees, build workforce housing, or provide apprenticeship and jobs training.

1. Workforce development and apprenticeship programs, with employment guarantees for participants who complete the programs.
2. Scholarships for Chester High School graduates to attend a two- or four-year higher education program or participate in vocational training programs.
3. Funding a Community-Based Parametric Flood Insurance policy to cover residential structures within the 100- or 500-year floodplain, which residents are likely unable to pay for on their own (for more information, see Recommendation C-2.3).
4. Sponsoring festivals, parades, and other community events.

S-2.1 Hold neighborhood Budget 101 workshops in partnership with community organizations.

To address community distrust and promote fiscal transparency, City Council members should host Budget 101 workshops each year in their neighborhoods in partnership with community organizations and schools. Workshops will give residents a chance to hear from their Council members about the budget process and share their own priorities. Ultimately, they will increase communication and transparency between elected officials and residents while also promoting fiscal accountability for Chester’s leadership.

TIME

Medium

COST

\$

\$

\$

\$

Under \$25,000

PARTNERSHIP

Mayor’s Office/City Council

FUNDING SOURCE

Delaware County Community Foundation

TIME

Medium

COST

\$

-

\$

\$

Under \$25,000 to \$100,000

Mayor’s Office/City Council, Block Captain Program (see Recommendation C-2.1)

FUNDING SOURCE

Delaware County Community Foundation

S-2.2 Establish Chester Community Grant program to fund community-driven initiatives.

In addition to sharing budget information, City Council should enable participatory budgeting by establishing a Chester Community Grant program. Residents and community groups could apply annually for funding for placemaking initiatives and infrastructure, programming, art installations, and other neighborhood priorities. Neighborhood Block Captains (see Recommendation C-2.1) and a community advisory group (see Recommendation S-1.2) could help select winning applications for implementation. By investing city resources directly in community initiatives, residents will be able to directly see their tax dollars benefit their neighborhoods and City Council will be able to repair trust. This fund could start small and scale up as additional resources become available.



S-2.3 Establish community land bank and training-based land care program to help assess and manage vacant land.

Chester has a substantial amount of vacant land, ranging from unoccupied properties in various states of disrepair or decay to fully vacant parcels. Given the limited available land elsewhere in the county, Chester’s vacant land represents a substantial development opportunity for building market-rate missing middle housing that will bring new middle-class residents to the city. By assessing the condition, property ownership and tax status of vacant parcels, the city can identity prime areas for new housing developments as well as potential new parks or other amenities.

New development must also be balanced by displacement prevention. The creation of a community land bank and land care program can help ensure that land in Chester is set aside for the benefit of current residents. The Pennsylvania Horticulture Society (PHS), which already coordinates Earth Day initiatives in Chester, would be an ideal partner to help the city establish and operate a land care program. Following the model of PHS LandCare in Philadelphia, this program would also present opportunities to provide skills training to residents and reduce trash and illegal dumping on vacant lots (for more on this, see Recommendation C-1.1).

- Phase 1:** Assess condition, property ownership, and tax status of all vacant parcels.
- Phase 2:** Identify prime land for redevelopment projects (including adjacent parcels over 1 acre).
- Phase 3:** Initiate Chester LandCare program focused on smaller and non-contiguous vacant parcels.

TIME

Medium

COST

\$

\$

\$

\$

Over \$500,000

PARTNERSHIP

PHS, Delaware County Office of Sustainability, Keep Chester City Beautiful

FUNDING SOURCE

Pennsylvania Horticultural Society, William Penn Foundation, Delaware County Soil & Water Conservation District



Fig. 64: Philadelphia Horticulture Society Logo

Case Study: PHS LandCare Program

Since 2004, the City of Philadelphia and the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society have partnered on the PHS LandCare program to green and clean over 12,000 vacant lots in distressed neighborhoods across the city. The program has had demonstrated success in improving public health outcomes, increasing property values, and reducing crime in the areas around its maintained lots – demonstrating a 41% decrease in depression, 29% decrease in gun violence, and 4.3% increase in property values. Through the LandCare program, properties are planted with grass as well as tress and other plants, and litter is regularly collected by local landscaping crews; the program has also created a workforce training program to help boost employment opportunities for neighborhood residents.



Fig. 65: Example of vacant land throughout Chester that could be a candidate for a land care program



Fig. 66: There are many parcels of vacant land in Chester that could be redeveloped into public parks, mixed-use housing, or community amenities.

S-3.1 Prepare to shut down incinerator by 2045.

Chester and Delaware County leaders have big development goals for the waterfront, including an expanded recreational footprint, a hotel and conference center, a music venue, and housing. However, several city and county officials have openly expressed skepticism that this development will ever be able to come to fruition next to an active, often foul-smelling incinerator.

The incinerator contributes significantly to the city’s public health crisis and in other states, ReWorld has been forced to close its incinerators due to its unwillingness to adhere to air pollution regulations. City leaders should push to negotiate a Good Neighbor Agreement with ReWorld, and they should lobby the General Assembly and Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection to exert additional pressure on ReWorld (see Recommendation S-1.3). Ultimately, however, the incinerator will likely need to be shut down in order to ensure Chester’s long-term stability, attract new residents and business, and achieve environmental justice.

Though the incinerator doesn’t employ many residents, Chester relies financially on the host fees paid by ReWorld per ton of trash incinerated. These fees have declined in recent years, but the incinerator’s sudden departure would still be catastrophic for the City if it were to lose out on a key source of revenue just as it is emerging from bankruptcy. The closure of the incinerator must therefore be carefully planned in order to achieve closure by 2045. In the short term, city officials should take a tough negotiating stance to extract any concessions possible from ReWorld. In the long term, the City must build up other municipal revenue sources to reduce financial dependence on the incinerator. Throughout this time, the City should also engage with Delaware County and other municipalities to reduce waste, end the County’s contract with ReWorld, and find alternative waste management streams that will not restrict revitalization efforts in Chester.

Finally, residents have protested the presence of the incinerator along Chester’s waterfront since shortly after it began operating. To avoid repeating past harms, residents must be the ones to determine the future land use for the site of the incinerator. Future land use could include a brownfields redevelopment, public park, or other purpose. Engagement should begin by 2040, or earlier, to ensure a sufficient runway for a design competition that receives advice and input from the Community Organization Oversight Committee and residents across the city.

TIME
●●●●●● Long
COST
\$\$\$ Under \$25,000
PARTNERSHIP
Public Interest Law Center, local and state climate and environmental justice groups, Community Organization Oversight Committee (TBE)
FUNDING SOURCE
Delaware County Community Foundation, EPA Brownfields Program, PENNVEST, PA Industrial Sites Reuse Program

- Phase 1:** Exert pressure on ReWorld to reduce environmental impacts of incinerator.
- Phase 2:** Strengthen other municipal revenue sources (see Recommendation T-3.1).
- Phase 3:** Work with other jurisdictions to reduce waste produced regionally.
- Phase 4:** Engage residents to reenvision land use at the site of the incinerator.



DESIRED OUTCOMES

- All residents are informed about local government operations and budgeting and feel like they have the opportunity to participate in municipal processes.
- Residents feel personally invested in City spending and that it benefits their quality of life.
- Vacant land is redeveloped without displacing longtime residents.
- Chester’s incinerator permanently closes and the site is repurposed based on community desires.

COMMUNITY ROLE

- **Community groups:** contribute to and amplify the city’s newsletter and other communication platforms, participate in Advisory Groups, and apply for community grant funding.
- **Community Oversight Committee:** engage in Community Benefit Agreement discussions and educate community members about what is possible and how to advocate for the community.
- **Keep Chester Beautiful and block captains:** participate and recruit volunteers and workers for the Chester vacant land revitalization program in partnership with PHS.



Fig. 67: Mural in downtown Chester



Fig. 68: Former Chester Times office building

REPAIR

R-1.1 Build on existing programs to increase access to housing.

There are already a variety of programs in Delaware County that can help Chester residents access long-term housing stability and ensure the city’s aging housing stock meets modern middle-class living standards, from repair assistance, to grant support for first-time homebuyers, to eviction and foreclosure prevention services. Unfortunately, Chester residents currently have to navigate a series of bureaucratic obstacles to get the help they need. Although most programs are funded by the Delaware County Office of Housing and Community Development, they are run out of different agencies, with only a few offices within Chester city limits.

To broaden the reach and improve the efficiency of existing programs, the City and County should deputize a staff member from the Delaware County Office of Housing and Community Development to coordinate rental and homeowner assistance within Chester. This staff member could also help advise city staff to seek out additional grant sources or other funding resources that would enable the city to hire a dedicated housing staffer in the future.

- Phase 1: Work with County housing staff to centralize and communicate housing program resources.
- Phase 2: Fundraise for and hire dedicated Chester housing coordinator.



Fig. 69: Affordable housing in Chester

TIME
Short
COST
Under \$100,000
PARTNERSHIP
Delaware County Office of Housing and Community Development
FUNDING SOURCE
Delaware County Office of Housing and Community Development, HUD

TIME
Medium
COST
Under \$100,000
PARTNERSHIP
Community & Economic Development Department

R-1.2 Update zoning to allow more mixed-use housing, expedite permits and approvals near commercial and transit corridors, and reward density.

Chester has a relatively progressive zoning ordinance with no parking minimums in the CBD and pedestrian-friendly, green requirements for new developments. Additional flexibility could be added to allow for increased density or create in-lieu fees in places where there may not be enough sidewalk space to add trees. Once Chester’s housing market has demonstrated growth and there are more market-rate housing developments in development, hopefully by 2040, the city could institute a Moderately Priced Dwelling Unit ordinance in stronger market areas to ensure affordability is maintained for current residents and to minimize displacement.

- Phase 1: Increase Zoning Ordinance flexibility with density bonuses and in-lieu of fees
- Phase 2: Establish a Moderately Priced Dwelling Ordinance in strong market areas.

R-1.3 Streamline small business permitting process.

Chester’s Economic Competitiveness Plan identified challenges with commercial permitting, licensing, and inspections processes that can pose substantial obstacles for would-be first-time business owners in Chester. The plan also noted confusion with the City’s development process and zoning as barriers to new development. Reducing the complexity of the permitting process and clearly communicating what information is required will enable residents to apply for permits more easily, saving them the time and money associated with completing paperwork, obtaining legal assistance, and allocating staff hours. These changes can also alleviate the city’s administrative burden in processing permits by simplifying the volume of paperwork city staff must process.

TIME
Short
COST
Under \$25,000
PARTNERSHIP
Community & Economic Development Dept.



R-2.1 Launch Rent-to-Own pilot program.

Despite its ample and affordable housing, Chester has a relatively low homeownership rate compared to neighboring communities and Delaware County as a whole. To support low-income residents becoming first-time homebuyers, Chester can introduce a grant-funded Rent-to-Own pilot program. In nearby New Castle County, Delaware, a similar program launched in partnership with Habitat for Humanity and JPMorgan Chase has enabled residents whose credit is too low to qualify for first-time homeowner assistance to pay low rents while building their credit for several years before enrolling in Habitat’s homeownership program.

TIME
●●●●●● Medium
COST
\$\$\$ Under \$100,000
PARTNERSHIP
CHA, Habitat for Humanity MontDelco
FUNDING SOURCE
JPMorgan Chase

TIME
●●●●●● Medium
COST
\$\$\$ Under \$500,000
PARTNERSHIP
Widener University, Swarthmore College, Delaware County Community College, Delaware County Community Foundation
FUNDING SOURCE
Chester Education Foundation, Delaware County Community Foundation

R-2.2 Establish centralized business resource center.

Small businesses make up a small fraction of Chester’s current labor force, but they could have an outsized impact on the local economy by providing jobs and services to residents. The city should support the expansion of the Chester Education Foundation’s Community Resource Hub as a centralized business resource center in the heart of Chester’s downtown. Providing resources and connections for aspiring entrepreneurs to learn about business plan development, technical assistance and training on how to navigate the financial challenges of small businesses, and mentorship from existing small businesses in the area will put more small business owners on a path to long-term success.

Case Study: Entrepreneurship for All

Entrepreneurship for All is a business accelerator program in Lowell, MA that helps develop early-stage small businesses and nonprofits to strengthen and diversify the region’s economy. The program is tailored to early-stage businesses that have raised less than \$25,000. Staff recruit heavily from under-connected communities, with outreach at farmers markets, bodegas, barbershops, and places of worship. Participants receive three months of intensive training (6.5 hours per week) and 9 additional months of structured team mentorship and coworking space, with the opportunity to compete for \$20,000 in prize money.

Since its start in 2010, the program has raised \$300,000 to run annual programming and awarded over \$50,000 in prizes through accelerator competitions and pitch contents. The program’s coworking space generates an estimated \$12,000 in annual revenue from non-participants.



Fig. 70: Entrepreneurship for All pitch competition



R-2.3 Partner with Community Development Financial Institution to finance business development.

Historic disinvestment and high rates of poverty have made it challenging for Chester residents to access loans to start or scale up businesses. To enable new business development, the city should partner with a local Community Development Financial Institution (CDFI) to increase access to technical assistance, affordable financing, and grants for Chester residents who are looking to create or expand their small businesses. Entrepreneur Works, a CDFI that has operated in Chester since 1998 with limited support from the city government, is an ideal partner for this program.

TIME
Medium
COST
Under \$500,000
PARTNERSHIP
Widener University, Swarthmore College, Delaware County Community College,Community Foundation
FUNDING SOURCE
Chester Education Foundation, Delaware County Community Foundation

R-2.4 Expand vocational and medical training programs.

Chester benefits from a wide array of existing training and apprenticeship programs – some active, others dormant for the past decade – run by a variety of different local organizations as well as Chester High School and nearby Delaware County Community College. These programs cover a range of sectors and fields including automotive technology, carpentry, cosmetology, culinary arts, HVAC, marketing, and plumbing. The city should scale up programs that are already working well and take steps to revive dormant programs, including an exploratory program for high schoolers interested in healthcare careers; the Nursing Department at Widener University could be a useful partner for this program. Finally, the city should engage with residents and local entrepreneurs to create new initiatives to fill in gaps, particularly targeting residents 25 years and older, who have generally not been the focus of existing programs.

TIME
Medium
COST
Under \$100,000
PARTNERSHIP
Chester Education Foundation, Delaware County Community Foundation
FUNDING SOURCE
Loan Fund

R-2.5 Establish a Corridor Improvement District from Widener University to City Hall.

With high levels of commercial vacancy, investments in amenities and infrastructure will be key to revitalize Chester’s central business district, stimulate the local economy, and create new job and business opportunities for residents. To increase foot traffic, the city should establish a Corridor Improvement District (CID) from the edge of Widener University to City Hall, which encompasses the majority of the central business district. The City should also apply for state funding to support its Facade Enhancement Initiative and implement street beautification projects within the CID. These funds will make it easier for commercial tenants to open in buildings that may have been vacant for years by reducing the costs that small businesses must take on to utilize the space. The City could also partner with local community groups to create public art installations and add to downtown murals to drive foot traffic.

- Phase 1: Establish Corridor Improvement District.
- Phase 2: Expand Facade Enhancement Initiative and implement street beautification projects.
- Phase 3: Create public art installations to drive foot traffic.

TIME
Medium
COST
Under \$500,000
PARTNERSHIP
Widener University, Chester Made, Chester Cultural Arts & Technology Center
FUNDING SOURCE
Delaware County Community Foundation, PA Main Street Matters, Main Street USA



Activate public spaces throughout the CID

The Repair Goal’s projects aim to increase outdoor amenities between the edge of Widener University and City Hall to make the area more inviting to visitors and residents alike. This corridor was chosen specifically because it encompasses the majority of Chester’s downtown and also includes several major housing developments, so these projects can directly serve residents and encourage additional mixed-use development in line with housing policy recommendations (R-1.1 and R-1.2).



Fig. 71: Proposed public activation projects along the Corridor Improvement District

R-3.1 Create interactive street space under Chester Transit Center bridge.

Duo Taco, an Afro-Mexican restaurant in the heart of Chester’s central business district, has invested in outdoor seating and lighting under the bridge adjacent to its storefront. They’ve hosted a number of special events, including Chester-Upland High School Homecoming, in this space. With vacant property nearby, the City should expand community-oriented space here with interactive play zones and fitness equipment that can encourage visitors to linger before Union games and get residents excited about coming to the CID.



Fig. 72: Public art on the street next to Duo Taco Restaurant (off frame left)



Fig. 73: Green space next to a vacant building across the street from Chester Transportation Center

TIME
●●●●●● Short
COST
\$\$\$ Under \$25,000
PARTNERSHIP
Duo Taco Restaurant, Chester Cultural Arts & Technology Center, Chester Made
FUNDING SOURCE
Community & Economic Development Dept.



Fig. 74: Proposed downtown street space



Fig. 75: Proposed downtown park space



R-3.2 Redevelop Deshong Park

Deshong Park contains a shuttered art museum, whose collection now resides at Widener, and it has been a hotspot of illegal dumping for years. However, the county recently invested in substantial cleanup at the park and there is interest in having the city take it over for redevelopment. We propose the city create an open-air amphitheater in the park to host local musicians and community events, which could be constructed at relatively low cost. The Delaware County Parks & Recreation Department operates a similar amphitheater in Rose Tree County Park, located in Upper Providence Township.

The property adjacent to Deshong Park, which is currently a vacant lot, could be turned into a mixed-use development with a grocery store on the ground floor and housing above. Long term, the City could work with Widener University to reopen the Deshong Art Museum to help encourage more visitors and use of the park throughout the year.



Fig. 76: Current condition of Deshong Park

TIME
●●●●●● Medium
COST
\$\$\$ Over \$500,000
PARTNERSHIP
Parks & Recreation Dept., Delaware County Parks & Recreation, Widener University
FUNDING SOURCE
Chester Made, Community & Economic Development Dept.



Fig. 77: Proposed amphitheater at the southern end of Deshong Park, looking north towards a re-opened Deshong Art Museum



TIME
Medium
COST
Under \$100,000
PARTNERSHIP
Parks & Recreation Dept., Delaware County Historical Society
FUNDING SOURCE
Delaware County Historical Society

R-3.3 Activate Ethel Waters Park

Chester native Ethel Waters was an American singer and actress known for her contributions to jazz, swing, and pop music in the early 1900s. In 1972, City Council dedicated a city park at the southern end of Chester’s downtown in her honor; adjacent to the park is a stone marker commemorating William Penn’s 1682 arrival in what became Pennsylvania, which was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1971. Relatively unused today, the park has infrastructure that could be lightly updated to increase water access and provide outdoor programming and music performance space.



Fig. 78: Current condition of Ethel Waters Park



Fig. 79: Rendering of activation proposed at Ethel Waters Park



DESIRED OUTCOMES

- Chester residents can access long-term housing stability and Chester’s housing stock meets modern middle class living standards.
- Developers are motivated to invest in Chester and create opportunities for new residents to move to the city.
- Chester residents have the necessary skills to obtain good-paying jobs; unemployment halves by 2035.
- The gateway to Chester’s downtown is welcoming and vibrant with thriving anchor businesses, reduced commercial vacancies, and market rate and missing middle housing.
- Widener and Chester strengthen a mutually beneficial relationship.

COMMUNITY ROLE

- **Local entrepreneurs:** mentor aspiring small business owners.
- **Legal Aid of Southeastern PA:** host regular workshops in community settings for renters facing eviction or harassment, homeowners in need of estate planning, etc.
- **Chester Made & Chester Cultural Arts & Technology Center:** contribute public art for Commercial Improvement District activation projects.



Fig. 80: Sign at Calvary Baptist Church



Fig. 81: Mural on side wall of CHA development



C-1.1 Aggressively pursue illegal dumping offenders and clean up waste in parks and public spaces

Chester has been the site of extensive illegal dumping for years, which City officials believe comes primarily from neighboring communities. Chester officials should take several steps to keep Chester free of hazardous waste and large-scale trash. The Police Department should ticket and tow abandoned vehicles. The Block Captain program should host regular clean ups. And the city should install night vision cameras at key dumping hotspots around the city and encourage the District Attorney to prosecute dumping offenders.

These steps will help improve the city’s reputation, attract new visitors to parks and green spaces, and demonstrate to residents that the government cares about their quality of life.

- Phase 1:** Ticket and tow abandoned vehicles; provide support to block captains and other local groups who host cleanups.
- Phase 2:** Install night vision cameras at key dumping hotspots around the city; prosecute dumping offenders.

TIME
Short
COST
Under \$100,000
PARTNERSHIP
Community & Economic Development Department, Public Works Department, Police Department, Block Captain Program
FUNDING SOURCE
William Penn Foundation

C-2.1 Expand block captain program to strengthen community and neighborhood identity through placemaking.

Chester lacks definable neighborhoods due to the physical fragmentation caused by transportation infrastructure cutting through the city. The city’s Block Captain Program is focused on local cleanup efforts. By expanding the program to include sharing resources, communicating new government projects, and neighborhood placemaking, block captains could help strengthen local sense of community while. At the same time, they could enliven public space and parks in each neighborhood with clear signage, lighting, public art, community gardens, and street furniture.

Block captains could also help organize neighborhood applications to the Community Grant Program (see Recommendation S-2.2) and organize events like a musical Porchfest or a Chester Culture Day to learn about various local organizations working throughout the city.



Fig. 83: Little Free Library in Chester



Fig. 84: Example of placemaking with stylized street sign

TIME
Short
COST
Under \$100,000
PARTNERSHIP
Parks & Recreation Dept., Block Captain Program, Keep Chester City Beautiful, Chester Made Collaborative
FUNDING SOURCE
Delaware County Community Foundation, Keep America Beautiful, Delaware County Soil & Water District, PA DEP



C-2.2 Establish urban tree canopy and shade structures program to address extreme heat vulnerability.

Many of Chester’s residents are exposed to extreme heat due to insufficient shade and large amounts of pavement that absorbs and reflects heat. The City and Shade Tree Commission could work with county and regional government partners to provide resources for residents interested in planting trees. The city should also consider installing shade structures at public parks and in other public spaces, as well as investing in bus shelters to provide shade at highly utilized bus stops.



Fig. 85: Deshong Park

TIME

Medium

COST

\$

\$

\$

\$

Under \$100,000

PARTNERSHIP

Parks & Recreation Dept., Community & Economic Development Dept., Shade Tree Commission

FUNDING SOURCE

Delaware County Office of Sustainability, Delaware County Soil & Water District, Arbor Day Foundation

TIME

Long

COST

\$

\$

\$

\$

Over \$500,000

PARTNERSHIP

DVRPC, PA Association of State Floodplain Managers, PA Insurance Commissioner

FUNDING SOURCE

PA Emergency Management Agency, PA Sea Grant, FEMA Flood Mitigation Program

C-2.3 Increase access to flood adaptation funding and flood insurance.

Chester is threatened by multiple sources of flooding (tidal, riverine, and rainfall) which are increasing in severity and frequency due to climate change. Over 500 structures in Chester are located within the 100-year floodplain, including downtown businesses. Few Chester residents hold a flood insurance policy, which is only mandatory for homeowners with a federally backed mortgage living in the 100-year floodplain. Without flood insurance, many renters, homeowners, and business owners struggle to recover quickly after a disaster and are more likely to take on debt in the rebuilding process. Having insurance improves recovery outcomes and helps encourage economic activity during the rebuilding process.

Residential and commercial flood-prone properties should not be managed with the same interventions. In the short term, the City should work with state agencies to seek grant funding to floodproof commercial structures to help protect investments in downtown Chester, and could also consider seeking grant funds to elevate or adapt residential structures that are more valuable or have less flood risk. Longer term, the City should collaborate with other flood prone municipalities in the broader Philadelphia region to seek out a parametric microinsurance product that could quickly deploy funds to impacted residents after a major flood event. This insurance product would require substantial collaboration and market research, and would likely only be financially feasible for smaller-scale payouts between \$5,000 and \$10,000.

- Phase 1:

Seek grant funding for commercial floodproofing from state and federal sources.
- Phase 2:

Scope and implement a Community-based Parametric Insurance Program with regional municipal partners.



C-3.1 Redesign major roads to improve safety for pedestrians, cyclists, and transit.

The City should redesign major roads to improve safety for pedestrians, cyclists, and transit users. Route 291, the state highway that separates the city’s residential and commercial core from the waterfront, is a particularly good candidate for a road redesign project. Route 291 has wide lanes, few signalized intersections, and low traffic volume; vehicle speeds routinely exceed 65 miles per hour. The East Coast Greenway website identifies Route 291 as an “extremely high-stress” segment of the bike route, which should be avoided by everyone but experienced long-distance cyclists. Traffic calming measures, physically separated bike lanes, improved sidewalk quality, and green infrastructure will transform Route 291 into a safer and more inviting corridor for all users.

TIME
● ● ● ● ● ● Long
COST
\$ \$ \$ \$ Over \$500,000
PARTNERSHIP
Public Works Dept., East Coast Greenway Alliance, DVPRC
FUNDING SOURCE
PA Department of Transportation



Fig. 86: Vision of Route 291 with new traffic calming features, improved bike lanes, higher-quality sidewalk coverage, and green infrastructure

TIME
● ● ● ● ● ● Long
COST
\$ \$ \$ \$ Over \$500,000
PARTNERSHIP
Amtrak, SEPTA, DVRPC, Philadelphia Union
FUNDING SOURCE
SEPTA, PA General Assembly

C-3.2 Relocate Highland Avenue Regional Rail station to Engle Street.

The Riverfront Alliance of Delaware County has previously proposed moving the Highland Avenue Regional Rail station to Engle Street to improve SEPTA access for residents and enable Philadelphia Union fans to more easily reach Subaru Park via transit. This is a long-term, resource-intensive project, but it is worth revisiting for several reasons. The Highland Avenue station – which is not wheelchair accessible, lacks shelters, and is just the length of a single train car – is insufficient to meet current needs, let alone to serve large numbers of Philadelphia Union fans arriving in Chester by train. A new station would encourage higher transit ridership and could serve as the end point for a transit-oriented development corridor extending northwest from the stadium.

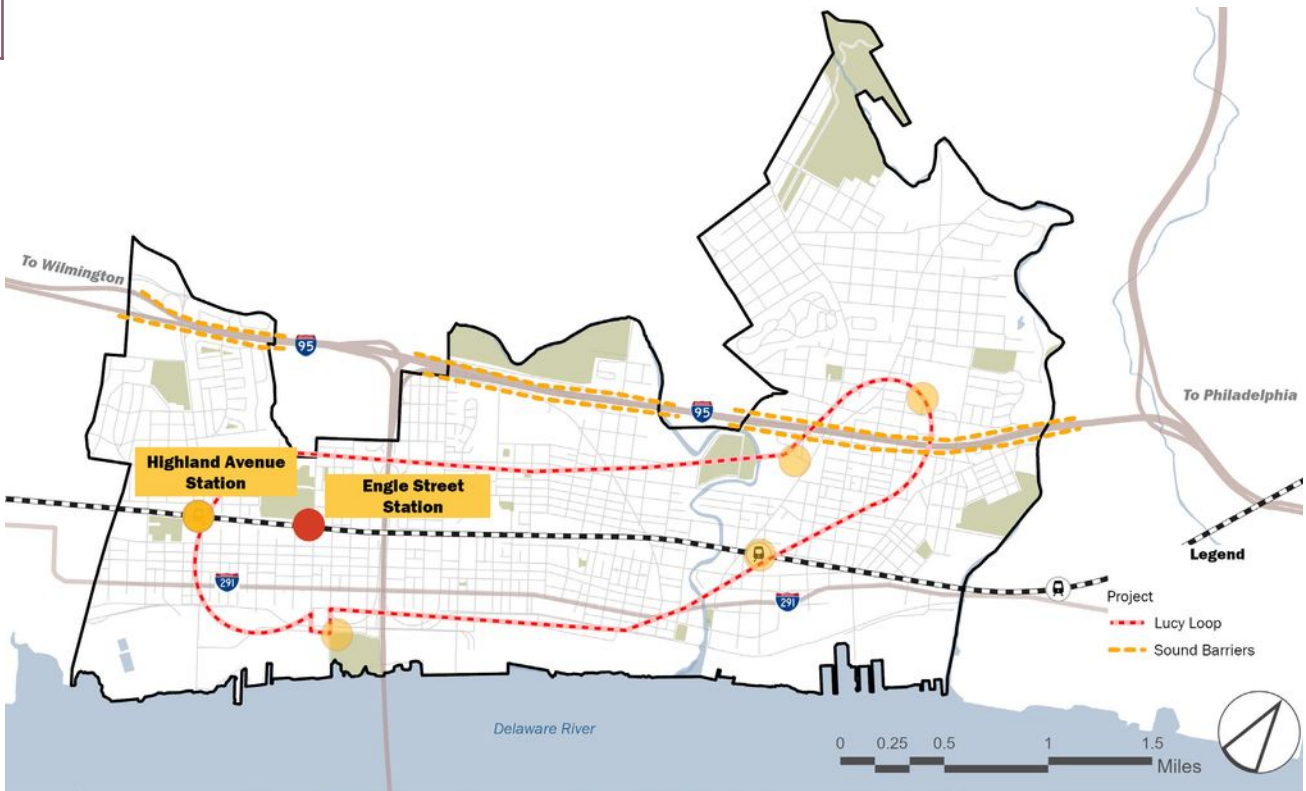


Fig. 87: Proposed relocation of Highland Avenue to Engle Street



DESIRED OUTCOMES

- Chester residents feel like they live in distinct and well-connected neighborhoods where they know their neighbors.
- It is safe and easy to travel by foot, bike, car, or transit in Chester.
- Residents have access to social and financial support networks following a disaster, including flood insurance.

COMMUNITY ROLE

- **Community groups:** implement tactical urbanism in key spaces to improve safety and neighborhood placemaking.
- **Penn Medicine and other medical advocates:** continue asthma awareness and diabetes educational programming
- **Corner stores:** opt into Food Bucks program and offer more affordable fresh produce to customers
- **Subaru & Philadelphia Union:** expand ‘Garden for Good’ food bank partnership program



Fig. 88: Flyer from 2025 Earth Day cleanup event hosted by Keep Chester City Beautiful and the Chester Block Captain program



Fig. 89: Cherry blossom tree outside Chester Memorial Park pool



T-1.1 Obtain grant-writing support for implementation funding.

Chester has been the subject of numerous plans in the past decade, but few have been effectively implemented due to funding and capacity constraints. The City should send a team of staff to the Local Infrastructure Hub’s Grant Application Bootcamp, designed to train small-city government staff to better navigate the grant-writing process and more effectively compete for funding. Bootcamp participants receive technical education, ongoing targeted support, and assistance with long-term capacity-building projects. After securing initial fundraising support, the City should hire a dedicated grant writer to ensure the City can compete for the funding needed to secure essential infrastructure upgrades and assist its most vulnerable residents.

Although adding a staff member to the City’s payroll comes at a meaningful cost, other cities have found that their in-house grant writing teams more than pay for themselves. For example, Louisville, Kentucky spends about \$288,000 annually on its grant writing staff, which brings in tens of millions of dollars in grants each year.

- Phase 1: Work with DVRPC grantwriting staff and train City staff.
- Phase 2: Fundraise for and hire dedicated Chester grantwriter.

TIME
Short
COST
Under \$500,000
PARTNERSHIP
Community & Economic Development Dept., Delaware County Planning Department, DVPRC
FUNDING SOURCE
Public Affairs Dept.

T-2.1 Create positive publicity campaign in partnership with local leaders, neighborhood block captains, and community groups.

Chester’s significant PR problems must be addressed before it can attract significant numbers of visitors from outside the city. Too few outsiders are aware of Chester’s lively arts scene, and too many still think of Chester as a hotspot for crime within the region – an increasingly inaccurate view that has been profoundly damaging to Chester residents. The city should launch a positive publicity campaign in partnership with local leaders, block captains, and community groups to share what’s happening in Chester with outsiders on residents’ terms.

TIME
Medium
COST
Under \$100,000
PARTNERSHIP
Philadelphia Union, Subaru, Parks & Rec Dept.
FUNDING SOURCE
Subaru Park

T-2.2 Plan festivals, clean ups, runs, and other events beyond game day at Subaru Park.

Chester benefits from a rich network of community organizations. Regular waterfront programming offers an opportunity to increase routine activity along the waterfront — which is currently limited, except on the Philadelphia Union’s 17 home game days each year — and engage community groups already doing great work in the city. These events, from introducing weekly group fitness classes in Barry Bridge Park, to reviving the once-popular Delaware River Festival, to routine clean-ups of the trash that accumulates near the Wharf office building, could be aimed at residents, workers, and visitors alike.

TIME
Medium
COST
Under \$25,000
PARTNERSHIP
Block Captains
FUNDING SOURCE
Public Affairs Dept., Visit Delco PA, Delaware County Chamber of Commerce



Fig. 90: Chester’s waterfront could host a variety of programming and activities for residents, workers, and visitors alike

T-2.3 Establish intracity bus service to enhance campus and community mobility.

Widener University currently provides students with on-campus shuttle service, leaving staff and students living off campus without connectivity to broader parts of the city. Meanwhile, visitors coming to Union games typically drive or take a shuttle directly from Chester Transportation Center to Subaru Park. We propose working with Widener University, the Philadelphia Union, and SEPTA to create an intracity bus service that would loop between the university, downtown, and waterfront with a 10-minute headway during peak hours and 20-30 minutes. With more activity throughout this commercial corridor, visitors will be more likely to come early before games to eat or recreate.

TIME
● ● ● ● ● ● Long
COST
\$ \$ \$ \$ Under \$500,000
PARTNERSHIP & FUNDING
SEPTA, Widener University, Philadelphia Union

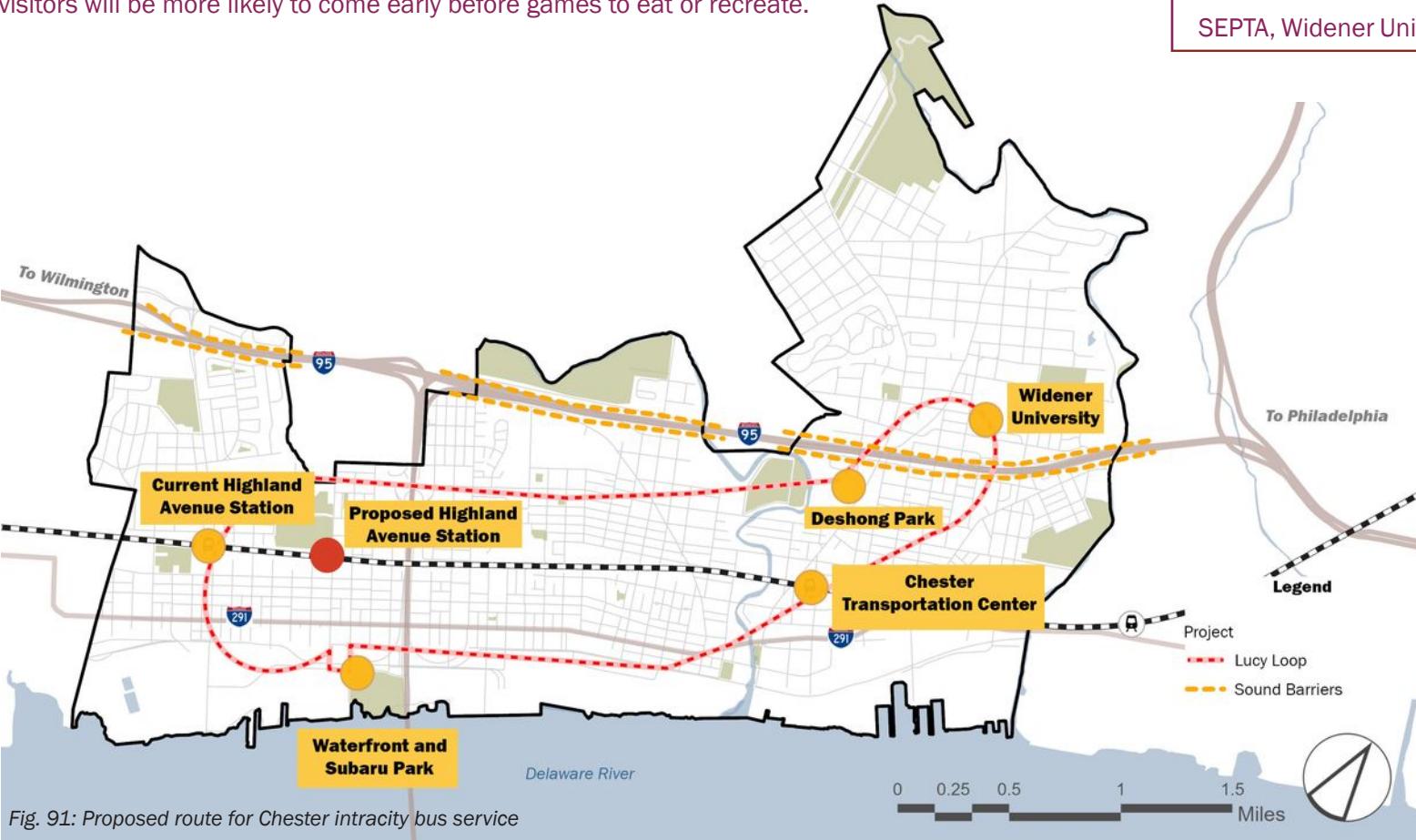


Fig. 91: Proposed route for Chester intracity bus service



T-3.1 Build on existing waterfront office space and attract new commercial tenants.

The former Delaware County Electrical Company building was converted into office space in 2004. The building – now known as the Wharf – has a near full occupancy rate today with the headquarters for Power Home Remodeling as well as the Philadelphia Union. However, there are few other developments like restaurants that would spur additional spending at the waterfront.

As the City looks to diversify its waterfront revenue streams, it should work with developers to create additional office space and conduct an analysis of future potential anchor tenants, including warehouses, an indoor music venue, or a hotel and conference center. Chester is well-positioned to provide these amenities to the broader Delaware County region because of its good highway connectivity, available space, and waterfront views. Compared to Conshohocken, which has seen large-scale commercial development over the past two decades, Chester is also significantly cheaper and less congested. Chester’s Keystone Opportunity Zones are concentrated primarily in the vacant lots adjacent to Subaru Park, which is currently used for game-day parking. These projects will take time and collaborative resources to develop, but they could be transformative for the waterfront.



Fig. 92: Existing Chester waterfront office complex

TIME
Medium
COST
\$ \$ \$ \$ Over \$500,000
PARTNERSHIP
Community & Economic Development Dept., Riverfront Alliance of Delaware County
FUNDING SOURCE
Delaware County Economic Development Corporation, PENNVEST, PA Industrial Sites Reuse Program, Keystone Opportunity Zones, EPA Brownfields Program



Fig. 93: Waterfront redevelopment in Chester could take many forms



TIME
Medium
COST
Under \$500,000
PARTNERSHIP
Public Works Dept., East Coast Greenway Alliance
FUNDING SOURCE
Philadelphia Union, Subaru Park

T-3.2 Make waterfront more welcoming to residents and visitors.

Chester residents are currently cut off from the waterfront by Route 291, a busy and unsafe state highway. The “Connect” section of this plan discusses Route 291 at greater length, offering traffic calming recommendations and action steps (See Recommendation C-3.1). But these recommendations will take up to a decade to implement. In the meantime, the city can take steps to improve access to waterfront parks that do not require costly and time-consuming infrastructure investments.

Even after crossing Route 291, residents and visitors traveling by foot must traverse multiple unattractive, unwelcoming, and unsafe surface parking lots before they reach the waterfront. The absence of dedicated walking paths poses dangers to pedestrians. To transform surface lots into a welcoming gateway to the waterfront, the city can add wayfinding to major waterfront landmarks, designate new paved and painted pedestrian walkways, and integrate traffic control measures like speed bumps. Additionally, in partnership with the East Coast Greenway Alliance, the city can encourage regional rail riders to walk or bike to the waterfront by building a new loop that connects the Greenway to Highland Avenue.

- Phase 1:** Install wayfinding to waterfront landmarks; add pedestrian walkways and speed bumps to surface lots.

Phase 2: Establish a new bicycle path from the East Coast Greenway to proposed Engle Street station.



Fig. 94: East Coast Greenway bike path



Fig. 95: Benches and other street furniture could make the waterfront more inviting

T3.3 Establish waterfront education center with community fishing, youth leadership program, and mussel hatchery.

Chester’s waterfront offers an ideal location for a catch-and-release fishing, education, and youth leadership program, similar to Bartram’s Garden in Southwest Philadelphia. Home to the only public boat ramp in southern Delaware County, Chester’s waterfront is the site of the annual Fishhead Fishing Club of Chester’s Children’s Day event, which draws hundreds of local families for fishing lessons, contests, and prizes. Expanding fishing and education programming could provide much-needed employment and leadership opportunities for local teens. Young adults involved in the program would learn the science of water quality monitoring, the politics of environmental advocacy, and they would get paid to teach their neighbors how to fish.

Eventually, this education center could draw larger numbers of both residents and visitors as the site of a freshwater mussel hatchery. Established in conjunction with the Partnership for the Delaware Estuary – which has funded similar sites in Philly – this mussel hatchery would benefit Chester by cleaning the city’s polluted waterways and by offering intergenerational science, art, and culinary educational



Fig. 96: Families fishing along the Delaware River in Chester

TIME
Long
COST
Over \$500,000
PARTNERSHIP
Parks & Recreation Dept., Chester Economic Development Authority, Fishhead Fishing Club, Partnership for the Delaware Estuary, Riverfront Alliance of Delaware County
FUNDING SOURCE
PA Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program, PA DEP Environmental Education grants, Subaru



DESIRED OUTCOMES

- Chester’s neighbors know about positive changes taking place within the city and are less reluctant to visit Chester.
- Chester is no longer financially dependent on polluting industries; residents directly benefit from new waterfront development.
- Capitalizing on the city’s proximity to the greater Philadelphia region, the Philadelphia airport, and Wilmington, the waterfront is an accessible, fun, and climate-resilient recreation spot that can be enjoyed by residents and visitors alike.

COMMUNITY ROLE

- **Community groups:** help create content for and amplify publicity campaign; administer and support waterfront and youth educational programming.
- **Philadelphia Union & Subaru:** add permeable pavers, solar parking canopies, and EV charging stations at Subaru Park to increase multimodal access and mitigate heat impacts for stadium parking.
- **East Coast Greenway & Delaware County:** help with pedestrian and bike pathways along the waterfront.



Fig. 97: Chester Party in the Park community bike event in Eyre Park



Fig. 98: View of Commodore Barry Bridge through the trees

IMPLEMENTATION



PUTTING THE PLAN INTO ACTION
IMPLEMENTATION MATRIX

PUTTING THE PLAN INTO ACTION

Chester’s Receiver anticipates that the City will emerge from bankruptcy by 2028. Maintaining Chester’s financial sustainability will be paramount for the sake of its residents, as well as to signal to potential anchor institutions and commercial tenants that there are safe opportunities for investment in the city. Chester’s long legacy of disinvestment and ongoing financial challenges mean that it will take time to effectively launch the city on a new path of growth and transformation. However, there are meaningful steps that elected leaders and community groups can take between now and 2028 that will help set Chester on the course for a brighter future.

Each of the goals in this plan provide opportunities for collaboration with community organizations and local institutions as well as regional government partners. Ongoing community engagement will also be needed to ensure the City continues to make advancements that serve the needs of current residents, while also making space to bring in economic growth, visitors, and new residents without displacement. Given ongoing uncertainty at the federal level, Chester will likely need to rely on regional government agencies, community groups, and anchor institutions to make the vision of this plan a reality. Building and maintaining positive relationships with legislators in the Pennsylvania General Assembly will be critical to ensure Chester’s voice is represented at the state level and receives funding opportunities, in addition to seeking out private sector and philanthropic partners.

Ultimately, we hope this plan charts a more equitable and sustainable path for Chester that brings government together with residents to make meaningful change while simultaneously addressing the city’s legacy of disinvestment and exclusion. If effectively implemented, this plan includes the building blocks that will help maintain housing affordability, provide access to intergenerational wealth building opportunities, reconnect residents within neighborhoods and to the broader region, and make our future vision for a transformed and economically vibrant Chester a reality.

	Recommendation	Priority	0-3 Years	4-15 Years	16-25 Years
Stablize	1.1 Improve municipal communication	✖			
	1.2 Create Advisory Councils				
	1.3 Community Benefit Agreements				
	2.1 Budget 101 workshops	✖			
	2.2 Chester Community Grant Pogram				
	2.3 Address vacant land		1	2	3
	3.1 Prepare to shut down incinerator		1	2	3
Repair	1.1 Expand housing programs	✖	1	2	
	1.2 Update zoning				
	1.3 Streamline business permitting				
	2.1 Rent-to-Own pilot	✖			
	2.2 Business resource hub				
	2.3 Business financing assistance				
	2.4 Vocational training programs				
	2.5 Corridor Improvement District				
	3.1 Chester Transportation Center Activation	✖			
	3.2 Ethel Waters Park Activation				
	3.3 Deshong Park Activation				
Connect	1.1 Pursue illegal dumping offenders	✖	1	2	
	2.1 Placemaking and block captains				
	2.3 Expand urban tree canopy				
	2.2 Flood adaptation and insurance			1	2
	3.1 Redesign major roads				
Transform	3.2 Relocate Highland Ave station	✖			
	1.1 Obtain grant-writing support		1	2	
	2.1 Positive publicity campaign				
	2.2 Events at Subaru Park				
	2.3 Intracity bus service				
	3.1 Attract new commercial tenants				
	3.2 Make waterfront more welcoming				
	3.3 Waterfront education center		1	2	3

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Timeline

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