

Penn Makes the Connection / University's Acquisition of Postal Service Land Links West with East

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If you walk or drive westward across any of the Schuylkill River bridges connecting Center City with West Philadelphia, descriptions of the surrounding city blocks and streetscapes that will not enter your mind are “easy access,” “pedestrian-friendly,” “culturally-stimulating” or “beautifully maintained.” At these major east meets west junctures, pedestrians and commuters encounter an unappealing ensemble of concrete office buildings, potholed pavement, grid-locked traffic, the drone of the Schuylkill Expressway, and twisted rail and freight lines where AMTRAK, SEPTA and CSX converge.

But that is about to change with the University of Pennsylvania's bold new 30-year campus development plan called Penn Connects.

Described as “a vision for accelerating our advance from excellence to eminence,” Penn Connects will transform the historic Ivy League institution's eastern edge to the riverfront while reconnecting and welcoming Center City to West Philly.

If all goes as planned, Penn Connects will have a dramatic impact on 21st century Philadelphia – not just on Penn's University City campus.

By mid-century, a once disjointed, barren, industrialized landscape will transform into beautiful, open public green space with athletic fields, a lively retail shopping and dining corridor along Walnut Street, a new mixed-use neighborhood filled with housing, art and cultural venues, recreational facilities, state-of-the-art research space, student and conference centers.

Penn will work collaboratively with the City of Philadelphia, its University City neighbors and all major stakeholders to create new “gateways” to the University via pedestrian bridges and pathways. In time, anyone will be able to stroll to or from the campus, across the Schuylkill River to neighborhoods throughout Center City.

“Penn's planned expansion eastward to the Schuylkill River will fulfill a vision we have been working on for a long time – closing the gap between West Philadelphia and Center City,” notes Stephanie Naidoff, Philadelphia's director of commerce.

How Will Penn Connect?

In July, Penn acquired 24-acres of land and properties around 30th and Market streets from the U. S. Postal Service. Last year, the Postal Service moved its Philadelphia Processing and Distribution Center from 30th Street to a new facility in Southwest Philadelphia.

Penn took possession of the post office's main building across from 30th Street Station, which it plans to preserve and change from industrial to commercial use. It also owns the postal annex property, a parking garage at 31st and Chestnut streets and a 14-acre surface parking lot near Walnut Street. In addition, Penn owns several parcels of land near the western banks of the Schuylkill River, currently used as athletic fields, sporting, parking or maintenance facilities. In total, Penn has more than 42 acres to redevelop and new opportunities to enhance, improve or extend campus landmarks such as Locust Walk, Franklin Field and the Palestra.

When Penn's president, Dr. Amy Gutmann, took hold of the University's reins three years ago, she made development of the eastern campus a major priority of her new administration.

"We will embrace inclusion as an employer, as a neighbor and as a developer of our campus to the east," she noted in her October 2004 inaugural address, "working collaboratively, we will convert the parking lots of the postal lands into research facilities and playing fields."

Shortly afterward, the University introduced its historic plans with the completion of an extensive award-winning architectural strategic planning study conducted by Sasaki & Associates of Massachusetts. The study received professional awards in 2006 by the Boston Society of Architects and the Philadelphia Chapter of Lambda Alpha International. In 2007, the American Society of Landscape Architects honored it for excellence in analysis and planning.

The estimated cost of this mammoth undertaking is \$1.94 billion. Penn, the city's largest private employer and the second largest employer in Pennsylvania, plans to finance most of it.

Craig Carnaroli, the University's executive vice president, says that funding will come from a variety of sources including a capital campaign, internal resources, government support and some borrowing.

"This year, we'll be using the 14-acre surface parking lot site to kickoff the University's fund-raising campaign," notes Carnaroli.

The University of Pennsylvania Office of Communications issued a press release last summer when Penn Connects was first unveiled. Here are some highlights that will forever change the landscape of University City and West Philly's connecting entrances to Center City:

- Improve gateways between the campus, Center City and surrounding West Philadelphia, specifically at Walnut and South streets.
- Extend Locust Walk eastward into what will be new open fields.
- Convert surface parking lots into new sports and recreation facilities and open parks.
- Create new plazas east of Franklin Field and provide new public gathering spaces that link the postal lands to the campus.
- Improve physical connectivity that links the campus with the transit hub at 30th Street Station and Market Street.
- Accommodate future development in academics and research and future expansion potential between Penn's medical campus and the river.
- Build a 400-bed residence hall planned in a quadrangle type setting with open space plan and walkway at Chestnut Street between 33rd and 34th streets.
- Develop a nanotechnology research center for the School of Engineering and Applied Science at 32nd Walnut streets, which is currently a surface parking lot.

The Greening of University City

Gutmann uses an analogy from the lyrics of "Big Yellow Taxi," a 1960s folk classic to describe what's planned for the first phase of the redevelopment project.

"If you're familiar with the lyrics of Joni Mitchell's song, 'they paved paradise and put up a parking lot,' well, we'll be do-

ing the reverse by turning those parking lots into green spaces. In the immediate future, you'll see a greener campus and a greener edge along the Schuylkill River" notes Gutmann, "and Penn will be better connected internally through beautiful new walkways."

Naidoff adds: "Greening the areas close to the water, improving the gateways to their campus and University City, adding new housing and more retail, a lively arts corridor, and at the same time expanding their footprint and allowing their institution to grow as it prospers is all nothing short of visionary. It is exciting for the city as it is sure to add jobs and opportunity for many Philadelphians."

Dennis Pieprz, president of Sasaki & Associates and principal on the project, says that the transformation of the postal parking lots into a park with sports and recreational fields "will improve pedestrian connections and make the eastern part of campus accessible, useful and a destination for students and visitors."

Locust Walk, the core of Penn's campus life, plays a prominent role in the campus connections. Pieprz notes that by transforming a significant part of the postal lands into parks and recreation space "the extension of Locust Walk becomes a reality."

"The university will now extend beyond the Palestra and Franklin Field areas toward the east. Locust Walk is a key link west to the heart of the university and beyond," says Pieprz.

Extending Locust Walk includes making improvements to the space on the north side of Franklin Field. "In the first phase of Penn Connects' athletic program, we'll be reclaiming space near Franklin Field's archways for better uses. Right now it is used for parking," notes Carnaroli.

Down by the Riverside

Penn Connects complements what is already well underway along "Schuylkill Banks," the newly branded destination place for the lower part of the Schuylkill River.

The Schuylkill River Development Corporation (SRDC) is leading a \$2.5 billion redevelopment project in partnership with the city, state, and public and private entities to revitalize an eight-mile stretch of the east and west sides of the Schuylkill River, south of the Fairmount Water Works to the Delaware River.

"It's an old, industrial part of the river that was not accessible. In fact, you can't even see it," notes Joseph R. Synchron, SRDC's chairman and CEO. "Now that the industrial use is largely gone, we're trying to create a more productive public use by adding trails, greenways, and activity along the river as well as improving the bridges. We want to make this part of the river a connecting force and possible destination place," says Synchron, "we want to reconnect people to the river."

"And anything we do along or on the river supports Penn," adds Synchron.

Over the next few years, Penn, SRDC and Philadelphia's Department of Streets will work collaboratively on several bridge improvement projects including reconstruction of the South Street bridge, scheduled to start in the summer 2008, and ongoing pedestrian and streetscape upgrades to the JFK Bridge.

Penn is working on a separate pedestrian bridge project, called the Weave Bridge, named for its unusual crisscrossing, tube-like design. The 145-foot steel structure will be built over the Amtrak rail lines, as a permanent walkway and connector while the South Street Bridge is down. Cecil Balmond, an internationally renowned structural engineer from the British engineering firm Arup, designed the Weave Bridge.

Penn Connects Raises the Bar

“One of the neat things about this plan is Penn can grow without displacing people, unlike some of our urban peers. It is mainly industrial space,” notes Carnaroli.

Other Ivy League institutions, such as Harvard and Columbia, and local universities, including Temple and St. Joseph’s, have major land acquisition and redevelopment plans underway. But none of their plans have the unprecedented advantages of Penn’s for raising the university’s national and international visibility. Nor do other institutions come close to Penn’s plans in size or scale.

“Penn Connects will make us exponentially more attractive to recruit the best and brightest students and the most pre-eminent faculty,” notes Gutmann.

In addition to adding green space in the immediate future, Gutmann says there will be an emphasis on more development of science and research facilities, including a proposed nanotechnology facility at 32nd and Walnut streets.

Carnaroli says that the Penn trustees approved a feasibility study for this project in June, and a combined fund-raising campaign is in the works by the schools of Engineering and Arts and Sciences.

“Now that we’re in control of our own destiny, you’ll see positive changes in various phases of design with momentum toward construction,” notes Carnaroli. “We’re moving ahead on multiple initiatives to enhance both academic and student life.”

Other campus construction projects either in design or underway enhancing Penn’s master plan to “connect” include: the Radian, a student apartment community at 39th and Walnut; the new Annenberg Public Policy Center at 36th Street between Locust Walk and Walnut Street; and the School of Medicine’s planned \$370 million biomedical research facility, targeted for completion in 2010. This facility will be located near the Raymond and Ruth Perelman Center for Advanced Medicine, opening in 2008 and the Roberts Proton Therapy Center, opening in 2009. All facilities will be located on the former Civic Center site near the Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania.