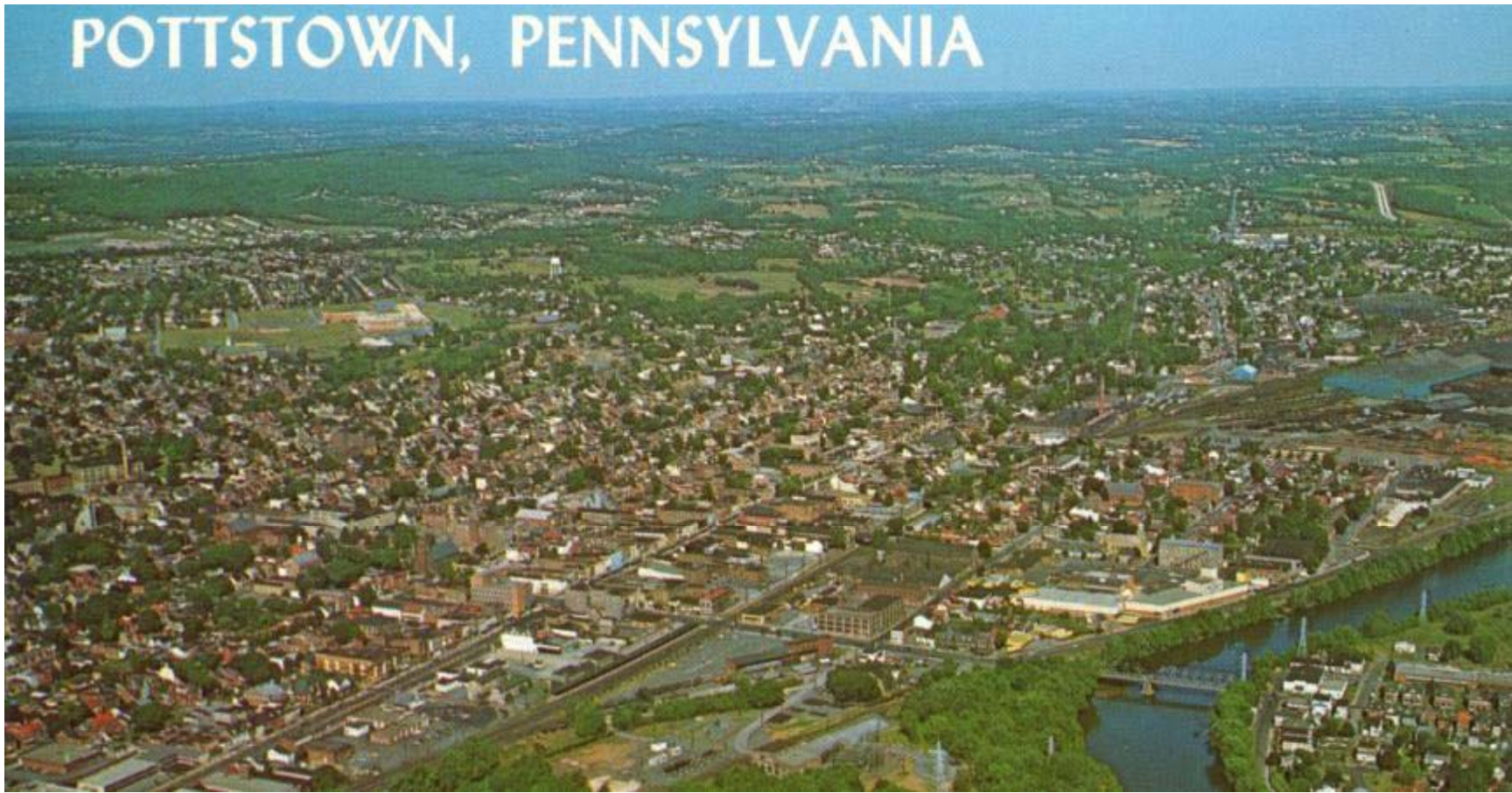


Over a 250-year period, Pottstown has evolved into one of the loveliest small towns in Pennsylvania. The borough reached its economic zenith about 1960 and continued to prosper through the mid 1970s , when its industries were booming and downtown stores were plentiful.

Since then, Pottstown has lost most of its major industries and all but a handful of downtown stores. Many of its middle class residents have moved to the suburbs, and the percentage of low-income residents has increased dramatically. **In spite of this, the town has actually improved in many ways.**

This history will highlight the major initiatives to improve Pottstown in recent decades.



History compiled by Thomas Hylton

Pottstown postcard from the early 1960s

In 1960, Pottstown's population peaked at 26,144 residents. Ten years later, the borough still had 25,355 residents. The borough boasted about 10,000 jobs, many in such well-paying heavy industries as the Bethlehem Steel Co., Dana Corporation, and Firestone Tire and Rubber Co.



- | | |
|--|---------------------------------|
| 1 - Bethlehem Steel | 8 - Neapco |
| 2 - Firestone Tire and Rubber (Lower Pottsgrove) | 9 - Clow Robinson Clay Pipe Co. |
| 3 - Firestone Plastics (Lower Pottsgrove) | 10 - Lincoln Underwear Factory |
| 4 - Doehler-Jarvis (West Pottsgrove) | 11 - Sunset Manufacturing |
| 5 - Stanley G. Flagg (West Pottsgrove) | 12 - Kiwi Shoe Polish Co. |
| 6 - Dana Corporation | 13 - STV Engineers |
| 7 - Mrs. Smith's Pie Co. | |

During Pottstown's most recent period of growth, 1950 to the 1970s, there was virtually no thought given to Pottstown's historic architecture, which makes the borough special and sets it apart from surrounding townships. **Many irreplaceable buildings were demolished, mostly for parking lots.**



The Bahr Arcade, and farmer's market, Pottstown's retail hub for nearly a century, was demolished in the early 1970s for a municipal parking lot at High and Charlotte Streets.



The North Hanover Street house at far left was demolished by Ludwick Motors in the 1960s for a used car lot. Ludwick Motors itself closed in 2002.



The Pottstown Opera House on King Street was torn down for a parking lot to serve the old borough hall.



Left, the Shuler House on High Street was demolished in 1978 for an urban renewal project that did not materialize. The lot was vacant for more than 20 years, and then became the new borough hall park in 2001.



The Merchants Hotel at High and York Streets was torn down in the 1950s for a diner.



The former Medical Center East is now an office building.



The former Medical Center North is now a Manor Care Nursing Center.

Perhaps the most positive event of the 1970s was the construction of a new Pottstown Memorial Medical Center building. The new hospital opened in 1972 at High Street and Armand Hammer Boulevard , replacing the former Pottstown Hospital and the Pottstown Homeopathic Hospital, which had merged in 1966 but kept their separate buildings.

In 2003, the non-profit hospital was sold to Community Health Systems for \$81.5 million, with most of the proceeds used to establish the Pottstown Area Health and Wellness Foundation.

Pottstown Memorial Medical Center today.



Pottstown's industrial decline began in the 1970s. The Bethlehem Steel plant, which had fabricated the Golden Gate Bridge and other major structures, closed in 1975 with the loss of 1,000 jobs. Firestone Tire and Rubber Co. closed its plant in Lower Pottsgrove in 1980 with the loss of 2,400 jobs. Other major industry closings followed.

1 – Bethlehem Steel **closed** in 1976.

2 – Firestone Tire and Rubber Co. (Lower Pottsgrove) **closed** in 1980.

3 – Firestone Plastics (Lower Pottsgrove), which became Occidental Chemical Co. in 1980, **closed** in March 2005.

4 – Doehler-Jarvis (West Pottsgrove) **closed** in 2001.

5 – Stanley G. Flagg (West Pottsgrove) **closed** in 1997.

6 – Dana Corporation is the only major manufacturer left in Pottstown.

7 – Mrs. Smith's Pie Co. **closed** in 1998.

8 – Neapco will phase out manufacturing at its Pottstown facility by 2012, eliminating 70 to 90 jobs.



9 – Clow Robinson Co. **closed** in 1983.

10 – Lincoln Underwear **closed** in 1988.

11 – Sunset Manufacturing Co. **closed** in 1986.

12 – Kiwi Shoe Polish Co. **closed** its Pottstown building in 1983.

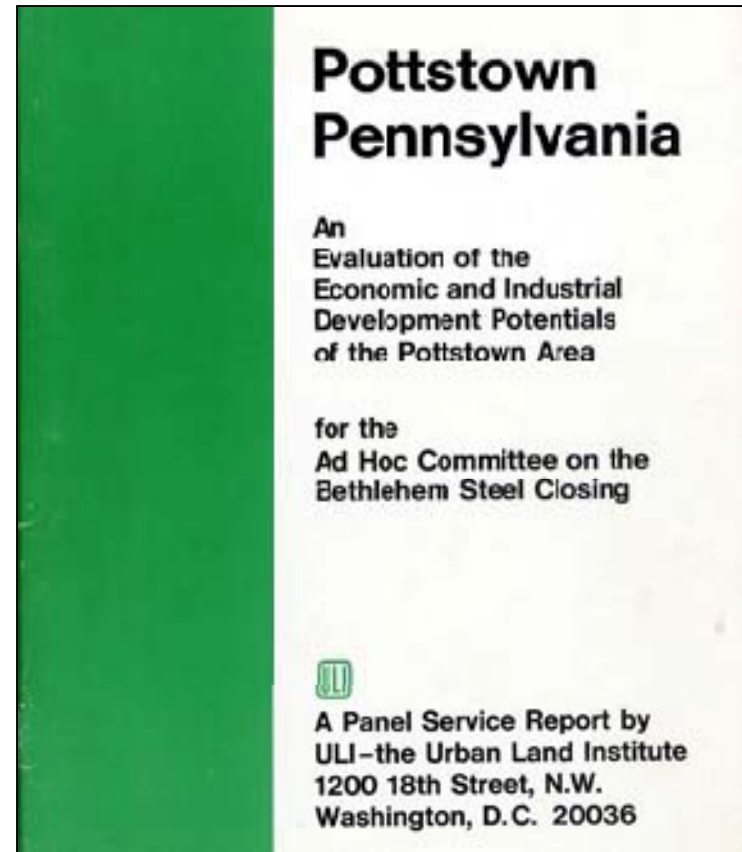
13 – STV **moved to Douglassville** in 1995.

14 – Gudebrod closed and liquidated in 2010.

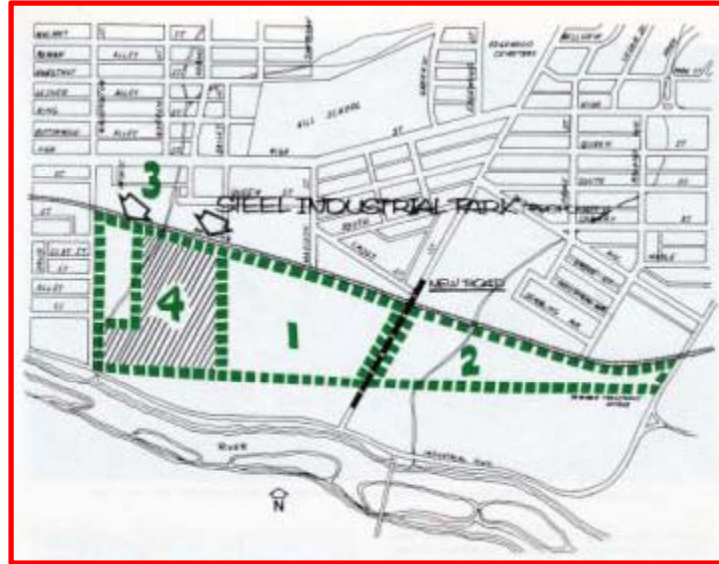
When Bethlehem Steel Corp. closed its Pottstown plant in 1976, it funded a study by the Urban Land Institute to help Pottstown recover. The 1976 ULI plan, written by a panel of 10 experts in development and local government from around the country, was designed to help Pottstown recover from the loss of Bethlehem Steel's fabricating plant, a Pottstown landmark which had provided 1,000 good-paying jobs.

The ULI panel spent five days in Pottstown interviewing civic and business leaders before writing its report.

Many of its recommendations were heeded, although it took more than 25 years to carry some of them out:



ULI Recommendation 1: Subdivide the former Bethlehem Steel property for new uses. The site was sold to Rittenhouse Bown Industries in 1984 and is now known as the Pottstown Industrial complex. The complex has 1.35 million square feet under roof.



Hill School



*Former
Bethlehem
Steel site*

The former Bethlehem Steel site is today the Pottstown Industrial Complex. It is the only area in Pottstown zoned for heavy industry.



ULI Recommendation 2: Reopen Keim Street through the former Bethlehem Steel complex from the Industrial Highway to High Street (completed in 1992 with federal grants). This made central Pottstown directly accessible from the Industrial Highway and Chester County via the Keim Street bridge.

A car approaches the former local headquarters building of Bethlehem Steel on Keim Street.

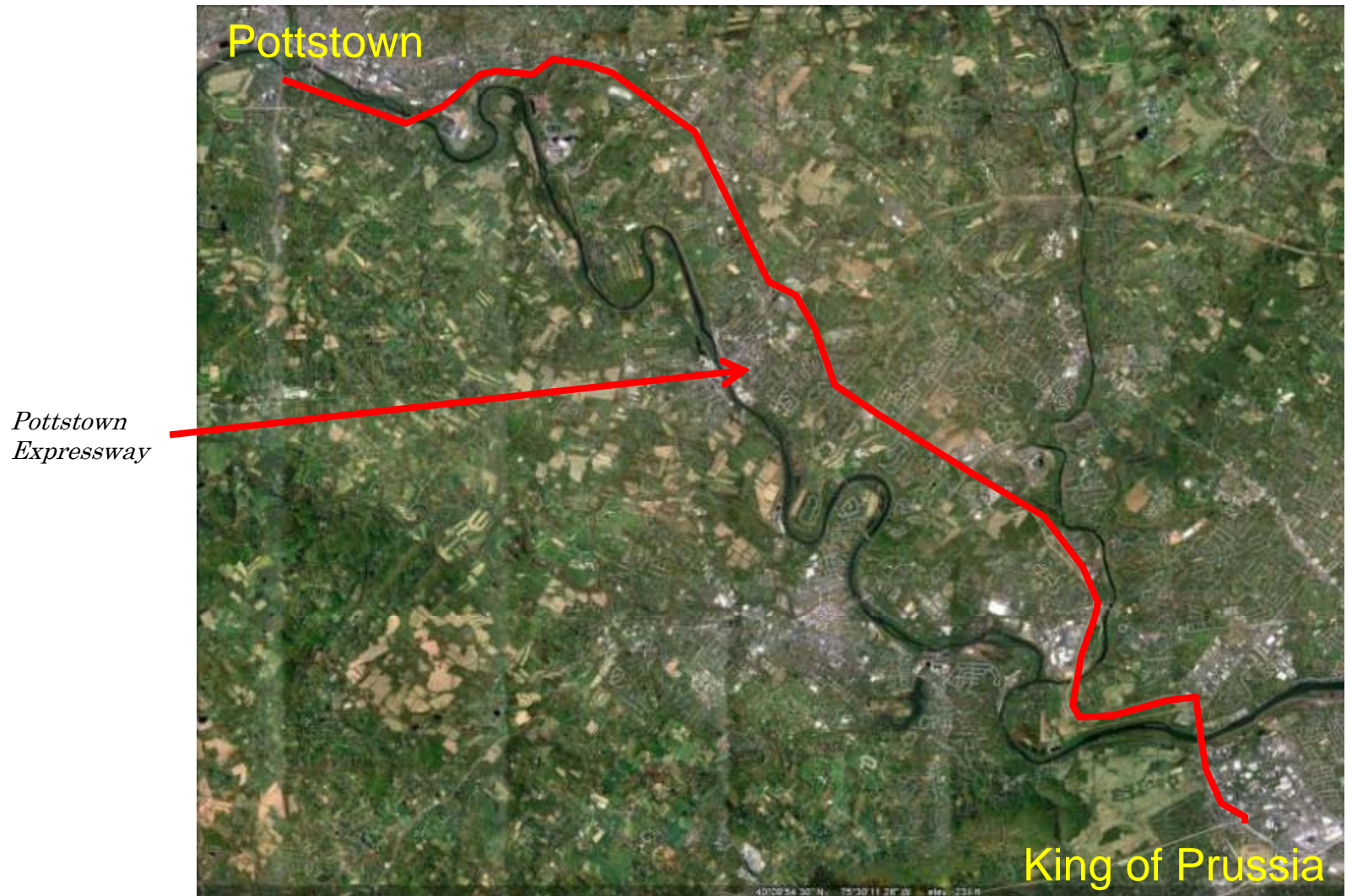


High Street



Keim Street

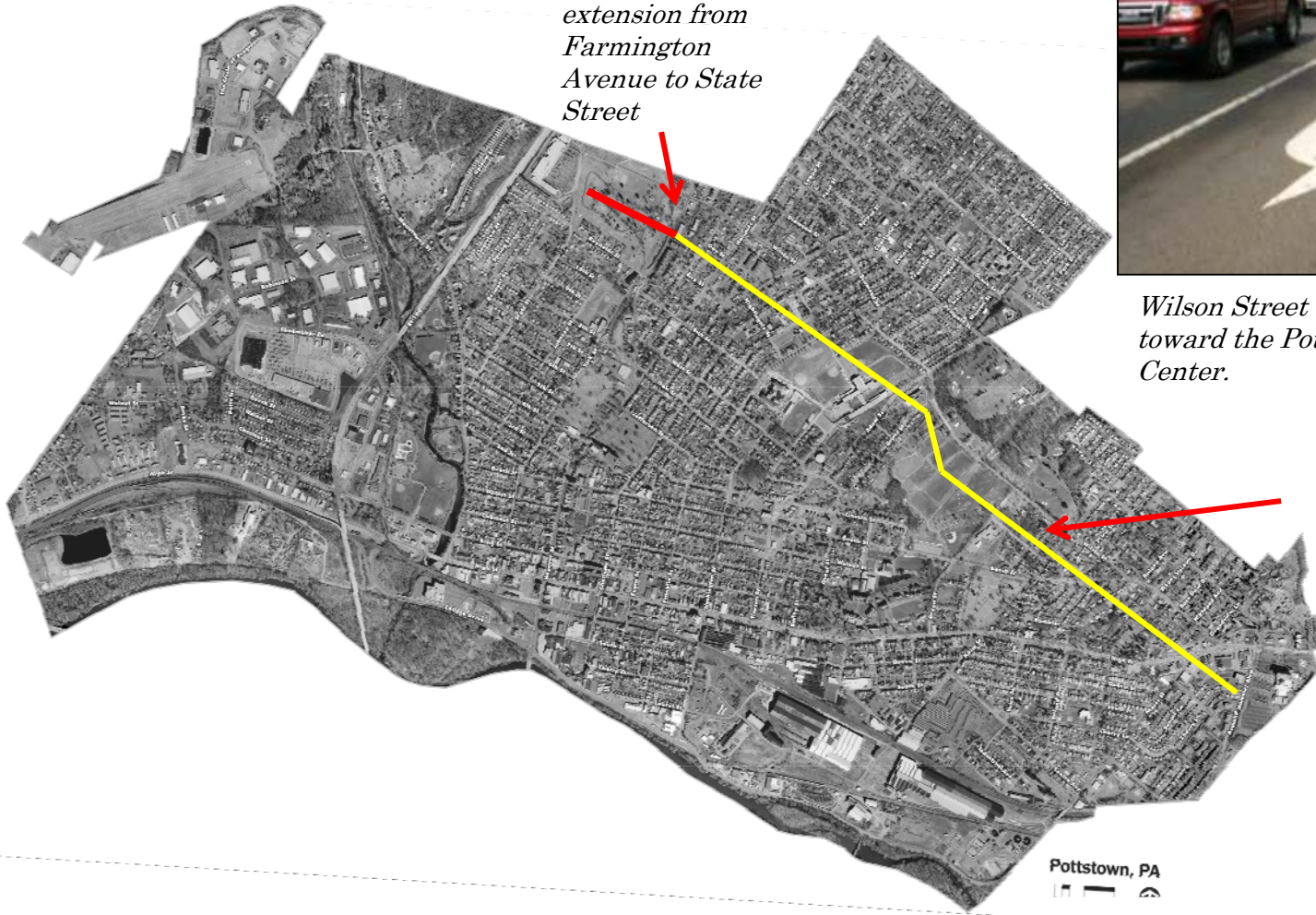
ULI Recommendation 3: Lobby for the completion of Route 422 from King of Prussia to Pottstown. Twenty years in planning, the 16-mile, \$102 million extension of the Schuylkill Expressway to Pottstown was opened in April 1985. It was called the Pottstown Expressway.



ULI Recommendation 4: Extend Wilson Street from Farmington Avenue to State Street.

Completed in 1991, the Wilson Street extension provided a straight corridor from the west end of Pottstown (Route 100 to the east end at High Street).

Wilson Street extension from Farmington Avenue to State Street



Wilson Street

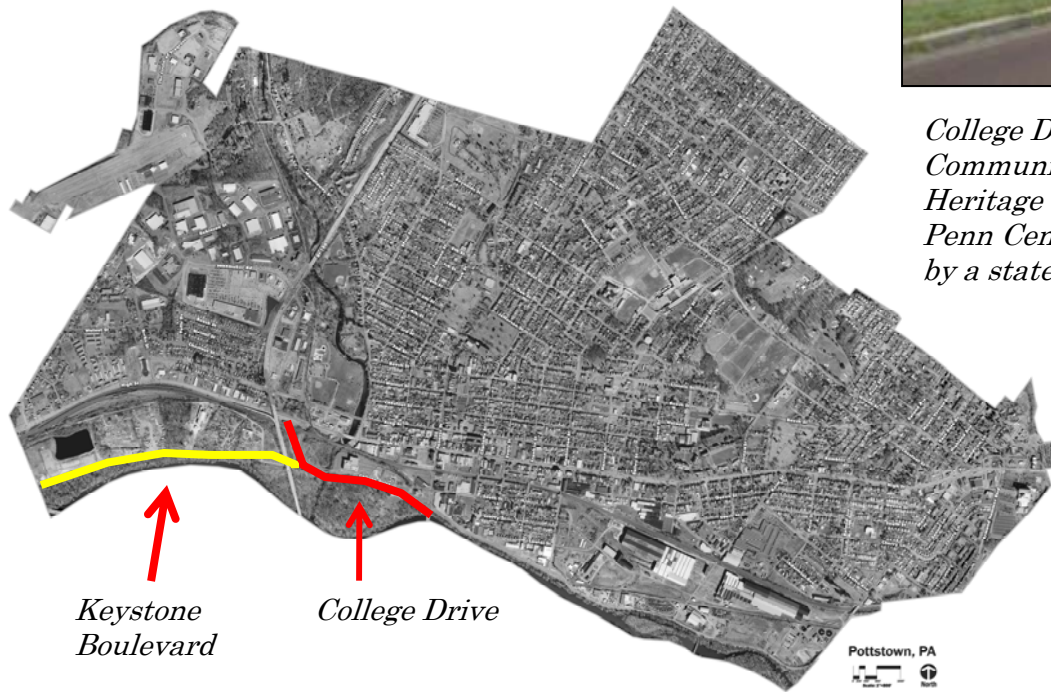


Wilson Street extension looking west toward the Pottstown Plaza Shopping Center.

ULI Recommendation 5: Extend the Industrial Highway west from Hanover Street to join High Street west of the Central Business District.



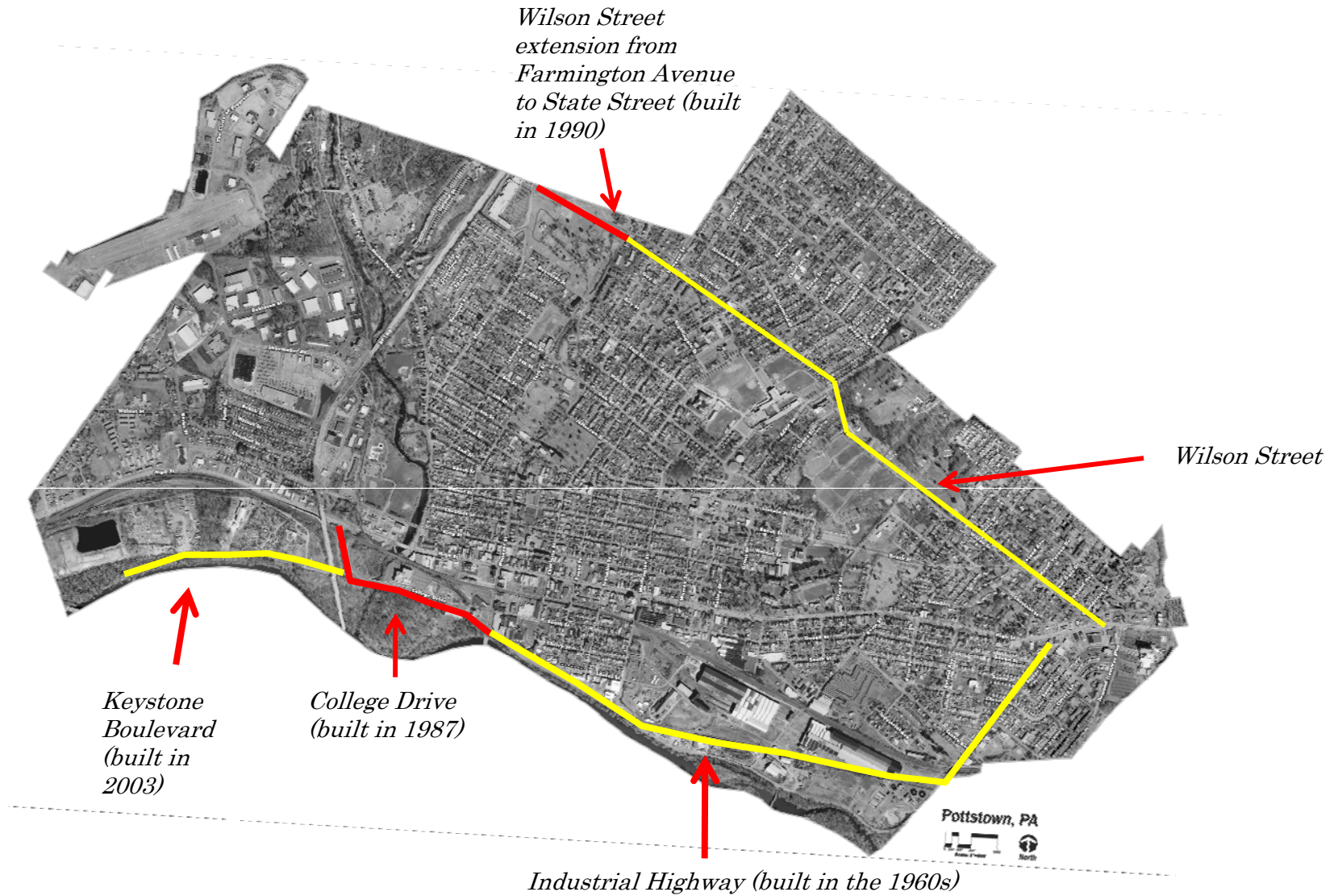
College Drive, looking west toward the Montgomery County Community College and the Schuylkill River Academic and Heritage Center, was constructed in 1987 on the abandoned Penn Central Railroad right-of-way. Funding was provided by a state grant.



The former Penn Central Railroad main line now forms part of College Drive, Keystone Boulevard, and the Schuylkill River Greenway.

College Drive was built in 1987 at a cost of \$1.8 million. Keystone Boulevard was completed in 2003.

With the completion of the extensions to Wilson Street and the Industrial Highway, motorists now had two bypasses through the town going from Route 100 in the west to Armand Hammer Boulevard at the eastern boundary of the borough.



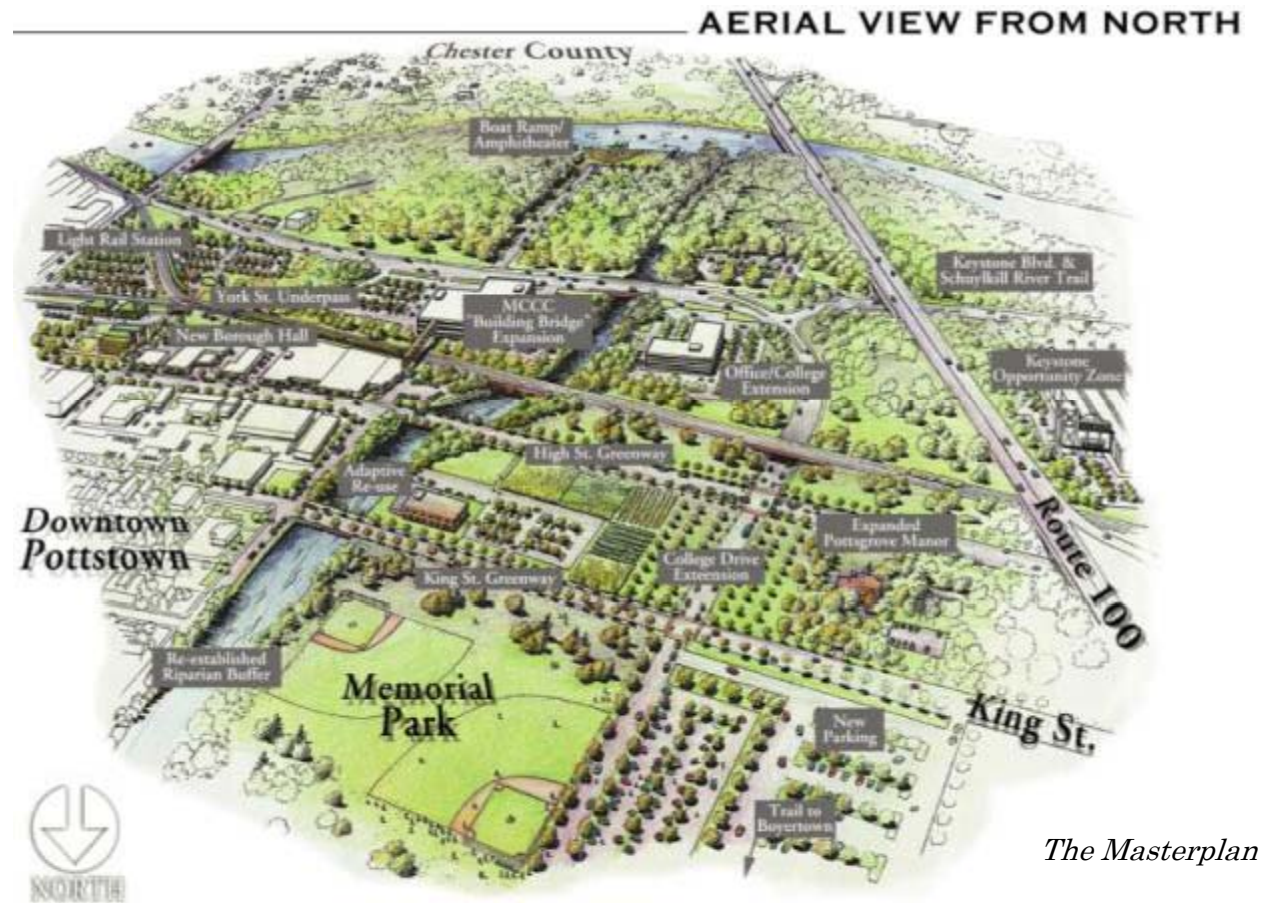
ULI Recommendation 6:
Develop recreational areas along the Schuylkill River and the Manatawny Creek.

Riverfront Park was developed in 1992.

The Schuylkill River Greenway extension along the new Keystone Boulevard to West Pottsgrove was completed in 2005.

The borough is in the midst of a \$6 million improvement program for Memorial Park, including reoriented baseball fields, a spray park, and a trail along the Manatawny Creek.

Nearly all the funds are coming from state and county grants.



Canoeing on the river at Pottstown



Riverfront Park

ULI Recommendation 7: Obtain parcels of land for multi-family, high density housing downtown, especially for the elderly.



In 1970, the Montgomery County Housing Authority built the Robert P. Smith Towers, left, at High and Washington Streets, to provide 80 efficiency and 1-bedroom subsidized apartments for the elderly and disabled.

The Sidney Pollock House, above, constructed in 1984 cater-corner from the Robert P. Smith Towers, provides 100 efficiency and 1-bedroom subsidized apartments for the elderly and disabled.

ULI Recommendation 8: Create a national register historic district to facilitate the preservation and restoration of Pottstown's historic architecture.



Pottstown's downtown National Register Historic District was created in 1985. A second district was created along East High Street in 1991.



The former Reading Railroad passenger station was among the first of many historic buildings that were restored with the help of federal tax credits made possible by the National Register Historic District. The train station was restored as a bank.

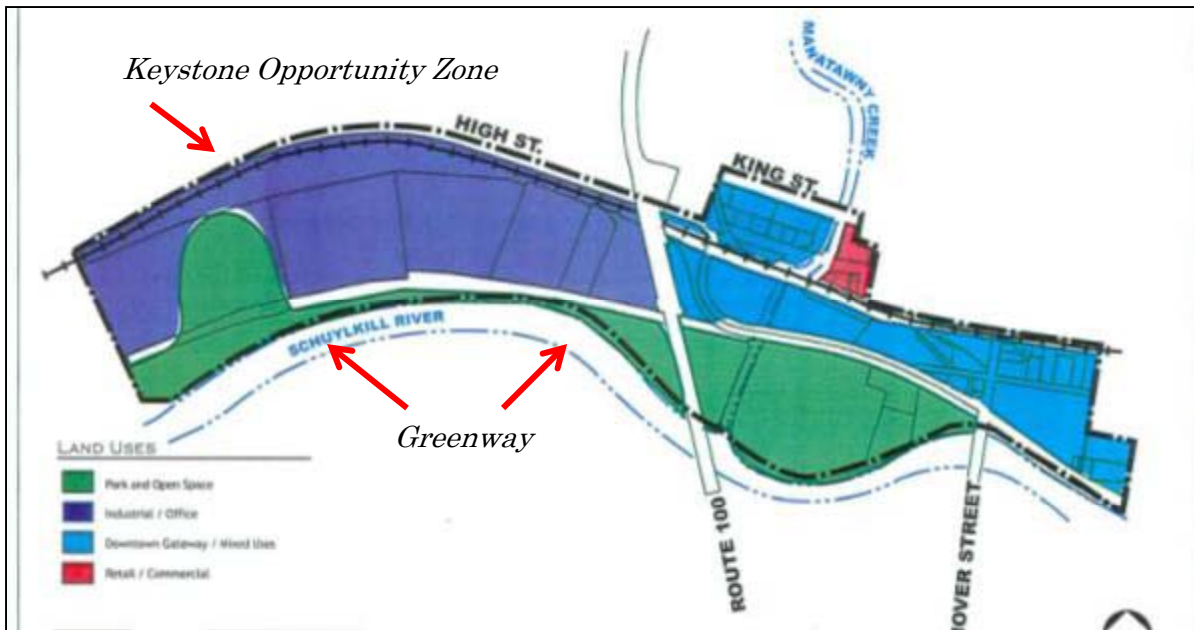
ULI Recommendation 9: Retain the former Reading Railroad station as a transportation center. The station was rehabilitated as a bank in 1985, but the borough is using the former passenger platform as a bus terminal.



Nearly 35 years after it was first suggested by the Urban Land Institute, work is currently underway for a \$460,000 bus depot along the former passenger train platform immediately east of the former Reading Railroad Passenger Station. The project is being funded with federal stimulus funds.

ULI Recommendation 10: Obtain vacant land along the Schuylkill River between Route 100 and West Pottsgrove Township as a new industrial park. (This land has been designated a Keystone Opportunity Zone. The 84 Lumber Co. built a truss plant there in 2002 and other land awaits development.)

This photo, right, from the 1976 ULI study shows the open land west of Route 100 that the ULI panel recommended should become a new industrial park. Some 58 acres of the site was designated a Keystone Opportunity Zone in 1999 and became accessible with the construction of Keystone Boulevard in 2003.



The map, left, from the 2002 Western Riverfront District Redevelopment Plan shows the 58-acre Keystone Opportunity Zone in purple and the Greenway in green.

**END OF PART 1
OF 6 PARTS**