



The McKees Rocks  
Community Standards  
For Downtown Development

Prepared by the McKees Rocks Community Development Corporation

10/2020

**FINAL**

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# What is the McKees Rocks Community Development Corporation?

The McKees Rocks Community Development Corporation (MRCDC) strives to help the Sto-Rox community grow in concert with its unique identity, and create places and resources that exist for all residents and businesses to reach their full social and economic potential. By facilitating commercial development, fostering neighborhood stabilization, growing community pride, and providing sustainability, we facilitate responsible property development, connect residents and community members with local and regional resources, and create opportunities for economic success.

## Background

Over the past several years, multiple properties within the McKees Rocks downtown have fallen into disrepair or become vacant. MRCDC purchased three of these properties and gained conservatorship over a fourth, with the

intention of eventually developing the properties and turning them into spaces that are beneficial for the community and support the local economy. Given the overall economic decline in McKees Rocks and surrounding areas, the market demand for these properties has been relatively low for the last several years. However, with the opening of the Roxian Theater in 2019, in addition to the growing success of many local businesses throughout the area, the market for these nearby properties has grown and interest in constructing new places to eat, work, shop, and play has grown as well. Now is the prime time to capitalize on the numerous new businesses taking root, and use these currently vacant properties in the downtown to help spur economic and social growth, and further support those investments.

## The Process and the Goals

At MRCDC, we believe that the best way to reach the goals outlined above is to combine the expressed priorities of the community with downtown development best practices that have

proven effective and beneficial for local communities similar to McKees Rocks. In the first half of 2020, the MRCDC embarked on a large-scale community engagement initiative, with the intention of gaining insight into what the community's priority goals are for the downtown. This process included the use of online and in-person surveying, reaching out to nearby property and business owners, educational property development workshops, and ongoing conversations with residents, where they could propose ideas, voice concerns, learn the basics of property development, and discover additional ways to get involved. Hundreds of community members and stakeholders were involved in this process, and as a result, five clear themes (community goals) for what makes a strong downtown were revealed: *History and Context*; *Things to Do and Places to Go*; *Atmosphere*; *Healthy Economy*; and *Community Support*.

The standards that are contained within this document are meant to provide clear construction and design criteria, that when followed, will achieve the goals described by the community for downtown

"New development should use architecture and facades (i.e. brick) that keep the turn of the last century vibe and blend in"

"I think with the development of mixed used properties that cater to locals as well as visitors, McKees Rocks can really begin to blossom."

"I would love to see a vibrant business district that would encourage folks to come to the Rocks to shop, eat and enjoy events."

McKees Rocks. These standards accurately and efficiently describe the community's vision for the business district, as imagined by current residents, business owners, representatives, and

stakeholders. This collaborative effort aims to provide a unified voice with which to determine the desired direction of development for the MRCDC, by the community. We believe this will aid in the process of reinvigorating the district by compiling, synthesizing, and focusing the interests and concerns of all invested parties.

*“Support existing businesses that want to expand or need help with improvements.”*

*“Please develop so that the community members who live here currently are not pushed out and are given a better quality neighborhood”*

# How to Use this Document



## **McKees Rocks Community Development Corporation**

The MRCDC will use this document to judge proposals submitted by potential developers for the development of the four properties listed in the property description on page 7. This document is meant to clearly describe the community goals and best practices as they relate to downtown development in McKees Rocks, discovered through months of research and community outreach. As such, this document will inform all decisions relating to the eventual development of these properties and - though not a requirement - it is recommended that the standards recorded within this document also be used to influence development decisions made by the MRCDC outside of the four requisite properties, as well as outside of the Lower Chartiers business district, where applicable. This document should assist in focusing the efforts of the MRCDC on property development strategies that align with the community's goals and priorities, at large.

## **Residents of Sto-Rox and the General Public**

The main function of this document for community members is to serve as an informational reference document concerning development that takes place on the properties in the downtown currently owned by the MRCDC. Because the standards described in this document are based on the community's goals for development in downtown McKees Rocks and best practices as they relate to modern development in general, this document can also be used as a reference for community priorities when residents attend community and/or public meetings concerning any development taking place within Sto-Rox, as a helpful tool when advocating for quality development that reflects the community's goals.

## **Potential and Commissioned Developers**

Both commissioned and potential developers should use this document to better understand the design decisions and construction practices that the community expects and prioritizes for each of the properties in question. This document will be provided as part of the Request for Proposal (RFP) process for each of the four properties in the downtown, and proposals that are submitted to the MRCDC will be expected to demonstrate an understanding of the community goals outlined herein. Successful proposals will incorporate elements of design and execution that align with the values and goals outlined herein. After a developer has been awarded the bid for a given property, this document should be used a "check-list" throughout the design process, referenced as needed in assessing every iteration of design, including the final design.

# The Properties



This document outlines the qualities that should be sought for any potential development on the vacant lots at 507 & 533/597 Chartiers Ave., the old Bank Building at 602 Chartiers Ave., and the property at 1 Furnace Street, with the potential to be used as a source of reference for additional developments in the future.

## Existing Conditions

The properties in question (shown below) are all located within the Lower Chartiers business district, visually prominent, and within walking distance of some of McKees Rocks' most frequented businesses and services. Because of their central location, each of these properties has the potential to heavily influence the downtown individually, and it goes without saying that the development of all four properties could drastically change the way that downtown McKees Rocks looks, feels, and functions.

## Property Profiles

### **533/597 Chartiers Avenue:**

This property sits between Hollowood Music and Sound, and Angela Nolfi Interior Design. This property contains 0.22 acres.

### **507 Chartiers Avenue:**

Formerly the site of a McDonalds' Restaurant, this site is contractually restricted from housing any chain restaurants. This property is situated between Key Bank and The Roxian Theatre, and contains 0.35 acres.

### **602 Chartiers Avenue:**

A bustling building with a bank on the first floor and apartments above it in past decades, this property houses one of the oldest and most iconic buildings in McKees Rocks, and certainly within the downtown. The "Bank Building" houses four floors, and is a total of ~27,000 square feet. MRCDC is currently in the process of stabilizing the building for future renovation.

### **1 Furnace Street Ext:**

Most recently a detailing shop, this property is located directly behind the Roxian Theater, and

overlooks Chartiers Creek. This property contains 0.62 acres (including waterfront real estate).

## Current Zoning Code

Last updated in 1974, the Borough of McKees Rocks Zoning Ordinance designates the portion of Chartiers Avenue containing the properties listed

above as C-1 commercial district, and states its community development objective as, “to designate an area for retail commercial activity to serve the needs of the residents of the Borough.” This ordinance also limits the massing of buildings in this zone to a maximum of 6 stories, or 80ft.



*An aerial image of Lower Chartiers Avenue, showing each of the above-described properties, and their respective locations.*



# History and Context



*A strong downtown offers more than just a place to shop or grab a cup of coffee - great downtowns represent their community's culture, and broadcast their unique identities. It goes without saying that McKees Rocks has a wealth of history, and that its history informs its culture, even today. The industrial boom that created the town, the economic downturn it later faced, and the social changes it has undergone throughout its existence all play a role in the culture that exists in McKees Rocks now. The downtown has lived through all of this history, and as such, residents and visitors should be able to feel the past history and current culture of the town when walking down the street.*

*But how do we demonstrate the culture and identity of McKees Rocks with building design? The following standards aim to maintain the urban, densely-populated context of the street, and improve the *sense of place* that exists there through the use of guidelines on building heights and placement, accessory features, and incorporation of public art.*

- New developments should adopt a *scale and massing* that relate to the existing downtown context. Height variations are allowable if conducive to the desired building design, but any variation in height should not break the continuity of the surrounding structures.
- Buildings should be a minimum of 2 stories and a maximum of 6, with an 80 ft. height maximum (as per the current zoning ordinance of McKees Rocks).
- Rooflines should be appropriate and conducive to the context of the surrounding structures.
- New building designs should mimic and/or complement the existing historic structures on the street, such as the Roxian Theater, the bank building at 602 Chartiers Ave., and Black Forge Coffee shop.
- Signage should be cohesive with the building design, and should add to the theme and style of the development, rather than stand apart or detract from it. Signage materials should correspond to façade and building materials.
  - If multiple signs are in use on one façade, the signs should complement each other, and be consistent in

*Sense of place* is an anthropological term that can be difficult to define, but generally refers to the feeling of distinctive character tied to a geographic location. A town with a strong sense of place will make locals and visitors feel like where they are is unique, and has a defining identity.

*Scale and massing* refers to the size and shape of structures, relative to their surroundings.

style/color/etc. Permanent signage is preferred over temporary banners.

- Priority should be placed on attracting interesting, non-chain, businesses that differentiate our downtown with a unique offering from other nearby shopping districts.
- The creation of new structures gives rise to great opportunities for permanent art installations. Integrated art that gives new life to functional building elements (such as walls or lighting structures) can be easily implemented during the construction process, and are strongly encouraged for future developments.
  - Permanent or temporary art installations can be implemented where *integrated installations* are not feasible.
  - Enduring aesthetic and cultural relevance and value should be considered for any artistic works meant for downtown.
- New developments should demonstrate an ability to capitalize on and support the regional assets of the area. Existing assets include: (1) proximity to downtown Pittsburgh, (2) access to local waterfronts, (3) core of successful businesses, and (4) proximity to Pittsburgh International Airport. The intended uses for any new development should demonstrate an ability to enhance the sense of place for the downtown, by capitalizing on these aforementioned local opportunities.

*Integrated art* describes the approach of building artistic design into the construction of new structures.

Integrated art is becoming more and more common by the year, and can be exercised with anything from walls and lighting to sidewalks and tree pits.



*Chartiers Ave. in the 1940s: the bustling business district of a prosperous town.*

# Things to Do and Places to Go



The exteriors of buildings will always be important in business districts, but what is even more important is what goes on inside those spaces. Beautiful buildings are great, but it's the activities and services that the businesses inside them provide that draw people in and keep them coming back. In McKees Rocks, where half of the population doesn't own a personal vehicle, being able to walk to daily destinations, like the drug store, the gym, and the grocery store is essential for the community. A healthy business district will be able to serve the community's basic needs, while also providing interesting activities and unique attractions that both support the community, and draw in visitors. This way, the downtown can bring outside revenue into the community through local businesses, allowing them to support the community through their success.

- *Specialty and novelty retail* uses are encouraged.
- Arts and cultural destinations (such as small museums, galleries, and entertainment venues) are encouraged, in order to support the growing creative atmosphere currently present in the downtown.
- Heavy industrial, mechanical, and warehousing uses are strongly discouraged within the lower Chartiers corridor.
- *Light manufacturing* uses are considered, as long as there is an active retail presence on the first floor.
- Sit-down restaurants are strongly encouraged, as well as other business types that will provide comfortable, social gathering space.
- Additional types of food service businesses are also encouraged, such as *specialty food* and take-out food options.
- Other *hospitality* uses will be considered, but are not a high priority in the downtown at this time.
- Additional business types/services that provide daily amenities will be considered on a case-by-case basis, and may be redirected to nearby locations that are not located within the main business district of Lower Chartiers Avenue.

*Specialty and novelty retail and food* describes any retail or food service store that specializes in a specific type of product, rather than offering a wide variety of product types. Examples of this include comic book shops or board game stores, craft stores, candy stores, ice cream parlors, and many others.

*Light manufacturing* uses are more consumer-oriented than heavy industrial uses (which tend to be more business oriented). Light manufacturing can mean the manufacture of things like clothes, furniture, or consumer electronics. Light manufacturing sites generally have less environmental issues than heavy industrial, and are better received in areas with residential spaces nearby.



*Love Rocks Café, located on the first floor of the Father Ryan Arts Center on Chartiers Avenue, serves an array of comfort-food style meals, with a focus on providing a comfortable spot for community members to grab a delicious, healthy meal. This local spot is a great example of a niche business fitting right into the community.*

*It's important to note that the developers that build the new structures on the properties in the downtown will ultimately have the final say as to whom the tenants are, and therefore what types of businesses/uses occupy those spaces.*

# Atmosphere



When you think about a town you enjoy visiting, what elements of that place come to mind? In addition to a favorite restaurant or retail store, the business districts we enjoy most tend to feel welcoming, active, and safe. Realistically, creating that kind of atmosphere in McKees Rocks will take a concerted effort from many groups (government bodies, nonprofits, and community groups) especially when concerning issues such as safety. However, we can influence the atmosphere of our downtown to an extent through the buildings we build. We can do this by incorporating thoughtful storefront and façade design, paying attention to building placement, contributing to a pleasant pedestrian *line-of-sight*, and prioritizing strategic businesses.

- The *first-floor frontages* of all developments are to house businesses or building common areas. In an attempt to increase the activity of storefronts from the perspective of the pedestrians, no first-floor residential frontage is permitted.
- Buildings are to be constructed to reach the sidewalk, with façades facing towards the street, built to the front property line.
- Loading and disposal areas are not permitted in the front of buildings, and are instead required to be out of the public *line-of-sight*, either behind or to the side of main structures.
- Additional parking is not a community priority at the time of this writing. Any parking developments are required to be located below, inside, or behind buildings. Parking access entrances should be designed in a way that corresponds to the rest of the building design and façade, and may not be located on main streets.
- Storefronts should utilize large windows and doors with minimal tinting and inviting entrances, in order to support visual connections between the activities inside businesses and the activities taking place on the street. The first floor of businesses should generally offer greater transparency than the upper floors, and a traditional storefront design with ample glazing is encouraged.
- Primary building entrances should be designed to attract pedestrians from the street, via the use of design features such as lighting, and trim. Security features such as window grilles should be avoided.

The hospitality industry includes lodging, event planning, food and beverage, and other tourism-related businesses.

Façade is the face of a building that looks out onto the street. The façade is often the most obvious and striking part of a building's exterior.

First floor frontage describes the portion of the building that faces the street, and includes the storefront and exterior façade.

Line-of-sight can be explained as the line along which an observer has unrestricted viewing. For a downtown or main street, we can think of this as the view you would have if you stood at one end of the street, looking down toward the other end.

- Materials used for *façades* should be durable and easy to maintain. Examples of acceptable façade materials include: stone, precast concrete, terracotta, masonry block, steel, aluminum, and transparent glass. Materials to be avoided include Stucco and exterior insulation finishing systems (EFIS).
- Any site materials (such as paving, lighting, or plantings) should also be selected with longevity and maintenance demands in mind.
- Any large signage or advertising should be oriented towards pedestrian and slow-moving vehicular traffic - no large, digital billboards will be permitted above the pedestrian line-of-sight.



The striking, custom-made luminescent guitar that sits on the front of Hollowood Music and Sound in McKees Rocks is a great example of quality, pedestrian-level signage.



Grandpa Joe's Candy Shop, located in the Strip District, demonstrates an inviting and well illuminated storefront that looks safe, welcoming, and fun.

# Healthy Economy



*It seems like a given that a thriving local economy is a must-have for a vibrant downtown; strong businesses support strong communities, and vice versa! Attracting new businesses that complement the existing ones will bring more patrons to those businesses, and more residents to The Rox. More residents mean more business, and the positive feedback loop continues. So, how can we influence these things with property development and building design? We need to create more and better spaces for people to live, work, and play, all within the downtown corridor.*

- Residential units will be considered above businesses (on 2<sup>nd</sup> and higher floors), in order to increase the density of patrons in the downtown, and support both existing and new local businesses.
  - Diversity in unit size and type are encouraged for residential projects.
- Office space, artist studios, and other working spaces are encouraged for 2nd and higher floors as well, for the reasons stated above.
- In order to best utilize the limited space available in the downtown and maximize the number of quality businesses that can be present there, spaces designed in a multi-use fashion will also be considered. These spaces can incorporate a variety of usage types, and a variety of unit sizes. A good example of a local multi-use space is the Father Ryan Arts Center.

*81% of those surveyed believe that local job creation is very important.*

*55% of survey respondents would like to see apartments above businesses in the downtown.*

*82% of survey respondents would like to see **multi-use spaces** in the downtown.*

# Supports the Community



*A strong downtown not only provides the local community with places to eat, shop, and hang-out, it also has to support the community and reflect the its priorities and needs. The best business districts care about the health, happiness, and prosperity of the communities around them, and they give back to them by hiring locally, caring about the environment around them, and creating and maintaining opportunities for the locals. It's not easy to influence these things through property development and building design, but we are certainly not powerless in making the community's priorities known.*

- o *First Source Hiring Strategies* are highly encouraged where possible, for both developers and businesses. This strategy is meant to bolster the local economy by providing additional employment opportunities for residents of McKees Rocks.
- o It is encouraged that usage and business types are strategically selected to provide local employment opportunities, and developers are encouraged to solicit tenants with a demonstrated commitment to increasing local employment opportunities.
- o *Locally-sourced materials* are encouraged where possible in order to reduce the environmental and financial costs of transportation, as well as to support the region's economy. The use of recycled and salvaged building materials is also encouraged, and projects are urged to reuse/repurpose/donate salvageable materials, as opposed to taking them to a landfill.
- o Responsible and effective *stormwater* management infrastructure should be employed for any new development, including systems such as rain barrels, gray water systems, bio retention systems, rain gardens - and any other systems proven to be effective in storm water management - in order to reduce the risk of flooding, and improve the health and safety of the local waterways.
- o Commitment to energy efficiency is encouraged for all new developments and redevelopments, in order to keep utility prices low, and minimize the amount of pollution produced. Some strategies for energy efficiency include the use of solar or geothermal climate control, and the reduction of seasonal heat gains/losses. Other innovative solutions for reducing energy usage are also encouraged.

### First Source Hiring:

developers and other employers coordinate with local employment programs in order to identify potential qualified candidates within the local community for employment openings, before recruiting from the public at large.

### Locally-sourced materials for

example, materials that have been manufactured and/or harvested within 500 miles of the project site would be given priority over materials shipped from outside the region.

Storm water is defined as the surface water resulting from a heavy rain or snow event. Stormwater is increased in areas of high development where precipitation cannot easily be absorbed by the ground, i.e. streets, sidewalks, buildings, or any other impermeable surface.



- o Any on-site plantings should utilize native plants where possible, and incorporate drought-tolerant species to reduce watering demands in warmer weather.
- o It is encouraged that artists are locally sourced from within the community when possible. However, works from other artists that bring positive attention to the district will also be considered.



*Storm water management in Etna doubles as attractive street art. Permeable sidewalks and decorative drains direct water and prevent flooding.*



*A rain garden in Millvale helps absorb storm water and mitigate flooding, while providing beautiful aesthetics and fresh air.*

# Additional Resources



## *Omicelo Cares/MRCDC Development 101 Real Estate Workshops*

In our free, virtual workshop series, you'll learn why developers want to invest here, the roles of zoning and planning, how you can get involved in the decisions that are made, and more. The course consists of three workshops, each led by a different regionally-known instructor from the city planning and real estate world. The series is a set of three consecutive recorded Zoom sessions, totaling 6 hours of quality instruction and discussion. You can find the workshops on our website, at [www.mckeesrocks.com](http://www.mckeesrocks.com).

## *Regional and Community Plans*

Many of the recommendations presented in this document were influenced by a number of plans produced by local and regional organizations over the last decades, concerning the future of McKees Rocks and the surrounding areas. These plans include:

- o The New Founding of McKees Rocks Strategic Plan
- o The Char-West Multi-Municipal Comprehensive Plan
- o The Master Plan for Chartiers Avenue Streetscape
- o The ULI Advisory Service Panel Report, McKees Rocks PA
- o The McKees Rocks Housing Strategy Work Plan

The plans listed here, and more, can be found on our website, at [McKeesRocks.com/Plan](http://McKeesRocks.com/Plan).

## *Tell Us What You Think!*

If you have comments, concerns, suggestions, or you've been inspired to get involved, please let us know what you think by leaving a comment at [McKeesRocks.com/Development](http://McKeesRocks.com/Development), or reach out to us at:

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