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A true 'classic'

By GRETCHEN METZ, Staff Writer

WEST CHESTER — Chester County has long thought its county seat was mighty special. Now a lot more folks will, too.

West Chester is one of 11 inaugural Classic Towns of Greater Philadelphia, a new Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission marketing program to launch today. The marketing initiative will promote the urban neighborhoods as good places to live, work and play.

West Chester is in fine company.

In southeast Pennsylvania, West Chester is joined by Ambler, Bristol, Doylestown, Lansdowne and Media boroughs. In Philadelphia, Manayunk and Overbrook Farms are Classic Towns. And in New Jersey, Collingswood, Hadden Heights and Riverton boroughs made the cut.

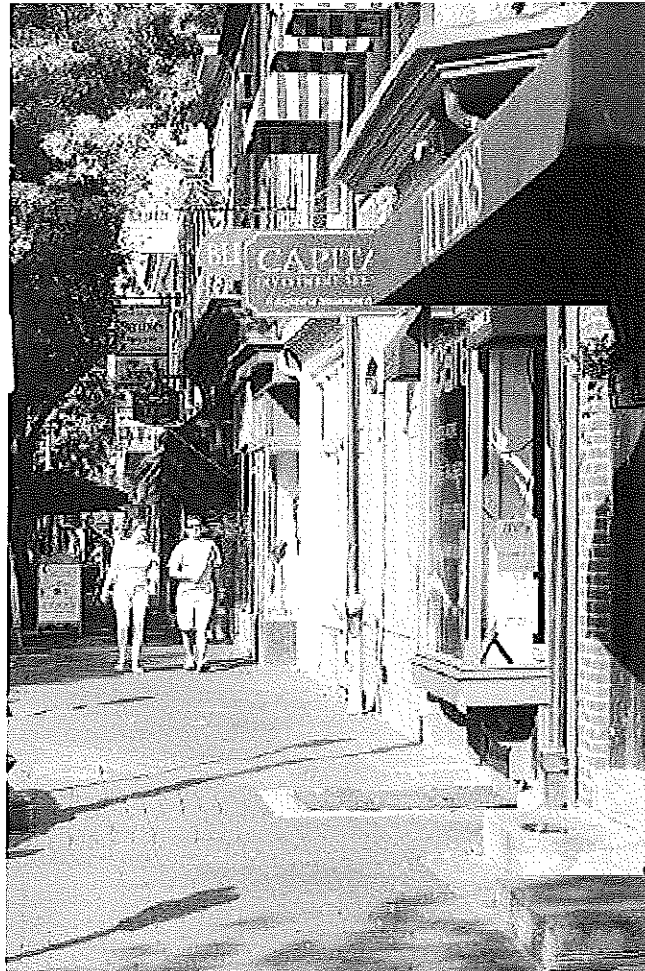
"By promoting the Philadelphia countryside, it positions the community as a destination opportunity for travelers to add to their itinerary, to bring them out to the Brandywine Valley," said Malcolm Johnstone, executive director of the West Chester Business Improvement District, or BID.

The buzz to brand starts this morning.

Representatives from all 11 Classic Towns will be at the Independence Visitors Center in Center City Philadelphia to launch the program and its Web site, www.classictowns.org. The town representatives also will sign a symbolic document presented by a historic interpreter dressed as Benjamin Franklin.

West Chester Borough Manager Ernie McNeely, Borough Councilman Chuck Christy and Johnstone will attend to represent West Chester.

The Web site will answer visitors' questions from tourism to relocation, Johnstone said. It will be a comprehensive view of each of the communities, including West Chester, and an opportunity to showcase West Chester.



Shoppers walk down Gay Street in West Chester. West Chester is one of 11 inaugural Classic Towns of Greater Philadelphia, a new Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission marketing program to launch today.— Staff photo by Amy Drago

Advertisement West Chester's contribution is \$5,000 for a two-year commitment, funded by BID.

That is BID's job, to help promote the community, Johnstone explained.

"This is a very exciting prospect for us," Johnstone said, noting that it is nice to be compared favorably with Manayunk and Doylestown, and quite special that West Chester is the only Chester County community to be included at the launch.

McNeely, who has been involved in West Chester Borough Council for 20 years, as well as a BID board member, said he is pleased the one-square-mile borough was included.

"It is a great program, great that the DVRPC is recognizing urban areas as Classic Towns," McNeely said.

McNeely said Borough Council has been informed about the program but did not need to vote on it since the funding from West Chester is coming from private dollars at BID.

According to the DVRPC, headquartered in Philadelphia, the cornerstone of the Classic Towns program is a regional marketing strategy to benefit the Greater Philadelphia region's older communities and neighborhoods.

The program provides individual municipalities with the tools they need to launch their own campaigns or enhance the ones they have.

By identifying needs, developing effective messages and creating strategies for targeted distribution, the Classic Towns initiative will help communities to brand themselves as

attractive places to live, work, shop and play.

The DVRPC is spending \$200,000 for demographic and market research, advertising and graphic design plus \$50,000 for Web site development. The funding came from a William Penn Foundation grant.

Also, the towns will contribute \$27,500 (\$2,500 each fiscal year) that will be matched by the DVRPC. That equals \$55,000 for subsequent advertising

The plan is to make the program self-sufficient in the future. To make that happen, the DVRPC is seeking advertisers and sponsors, along with the annual contributions from the Classic Towns themselves.

Barry Seymour, executive director of the DVRPC, said towns, such as West Chester, were chosen for a number of qualities.

"We looked for unique places ... real towns, nostalgic communities with a real feel," Seymore said.

To be a Classic Town, the communities needed to be walkable.

In Media, Lansdowne and West Chester, for example, Seymore said, you can walk to the dinner, walk to the library. While they may not have a supermarket, they have a farmers' market in the summer.

In the outlying suburbs, residents have to drive to do anything, Seymore said. Classic Towns have public transportation.

The goal for the Classic Town program is that, if someone from another part of the country was interested in relocating to the Greater Philadelphia area or starting a business, they can go to the Classic Town Web site to find out what the towns have to offer, Seymore said.

In a year, more towns will be added to the original 11.

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