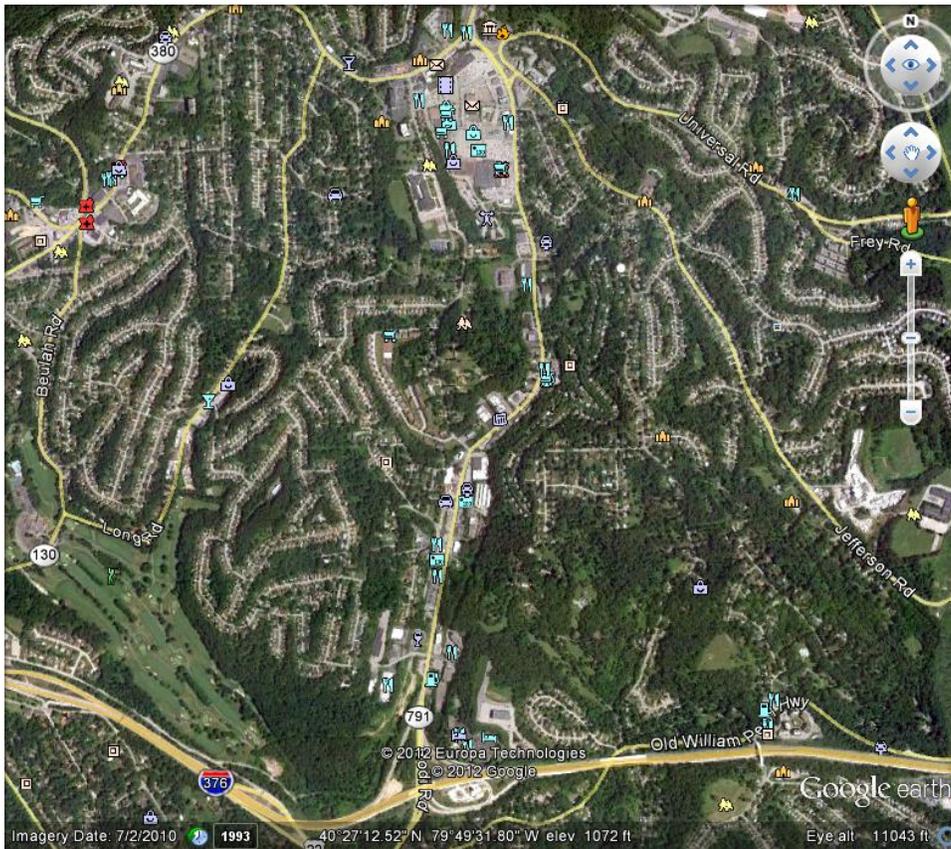


# Rodi Road Corridor Study

Prepared by The Penn Hills Community Development  
Corporation Economic Development Committee



This report summarizes the activity of the Economic Development Committee in 2011. Based on studies, discussions, and proposals provided by the Penn Hills Planning Department, it provides a basis for possible improvements along the Rodi Road Corridor. Some of these ideas are presently being implemented.

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## **Introduction**

Soon after the creation of the Penn Hills Community Development Corporation (CDC) members organized a series of committees. One of these was the Penn Hills CDC's Economic Development Committee (EDC). This committee then decided to undertake a number of projects that would focus on economic development issues. Around the same time we were offered the services of CMU graduate students who wanted to get involved in a community project. One thing led to another and soon we were going full steam ahead with a Rodi Road Corridor Study.



Rodi Road has always been labeled the “Gateway” to Penn Hills and focusing in on land use and economic development issues along Rodi Road was a natural result. The CMU students decided to narrow the scope of their study to the vacant Vanity Fair space in the Penn Hills Shopping Center and stormwater management issues – obviously two of the most important Rodi Road issues.

The CMU students went on to complete their work and their study is attached as an integral part of this Rodi Road Study. We thank them for their participation and we now have the challenge of continuing the project. We hope that the community takes interest and benefits from this study and we pledge our continuing support to the Penn Hills community toward improving the corridor and advancing economic development in Penn Hills.

## **The Process**

The EDC began by working with the CMU students. They provided local information and facilitated meetings with the Penn Hills Shopping Center owners, the Penn Hills Planning Department, and community representatives. The EDC also amongst themselves discussed a wide variety of issues related to Rodi Road, talked with Rodi Road property owners, and asked what they could do to improve the corridor and advance economic development.

The EDC went on to develop a survey and series of questions concerning the corridor. They delivered this survey to Rodi Road property owners and considered all responses in the preparation of this study. This effort concluded with a community meeting at the Comfort Inn in the fall of 2011 where many Rodi Road property owners, the Penn Hills Planners, local business owners, and EDC members jointly discussed Rodi Road issues. Many of the following goals and objectives of this plan come from this meeting.

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## Goals and Objectives:

Promote the development of new businesses and expansion or redevelopment of existing businesses:

1. **The Vanity Fair Space** – The CMU Student study of the Vanity Fair space gave the community a fresh insight into future possibilities for the reuse of this space. The CDC proposes to meet with the owners of the Penn Hills Shopping Center to pass along the findings of this study and discuss ways the community can help to market the space.
2. **Vacant Land and Vacant Buildings** – There are several available vacant lots and vacant buildings in the corridor. For example, the Grasso property abutting the Dunkin Donut shop has been available for decades. The CDC proposes to contact the Grasso family to discuss future possibilities for this vacant lot. Other more recent possibilities are the vacant land immediately south of the NAPA Auto Parts business, the vacant Enterprise car rental building, the vacant Johnny Mikes Tavern, and the vacant auto repair garage at Purity and Rodi. We need to encourage development, contact owners, and meet with those who control these properties.
3. **Vocollect** – The CDC applauds the efforts of Vocollect and Joseph D' Andrea in developing a traffic light at Maple and Rodi, This will improve the safety of traffic circulation at this location and more importantly help to retain existing businesses in the vicinity. The CDC also supports the development of a new office building on Maple Lane for Vocollect's expansion. The CDC will monitor the owner's applications for land development approval and show support when appropriate.



## Support or Undertake Beautification Projects:

1. **Beautification Project** - The County currently mows the vacant right of way at the intersections of Rodi, Jefferson, and Frankstown, near the Whitehawk Café. This property could be more elaborately landscaped and a nice beautification project for a community organization willing to take it on. We should investigate the possibility of cutting openings in the curb to allow this area to take sheet flow to contribute to the control of storm water. This will involve some thought on landscaping to solve maintenance problems. A garden club could, for example, plant appropriate vegetation based upon the flow of the water. This could perhaps be a site for the CDC's Beautification Committee. If the CDC identifies an interested party committed to the project the Planning Department has offered to contact the County officials to seek site control.
2. **The Gateway** – The vacant land at Rodi and the Parkway along the ramps has been identified as a possible site for the Western Pa. Conservancy to undertake landscaping. The CDC should contact the WPC and encourage them to adopt this location. Additionally, the County currently owns the vacant gas station at Maple and Rodi and redevelopment prospects for this site are not encouraging. The CDC proposes to lobby the County to dedicate this property to the community as green space. The Penn Hills CDBG budget could be used to demolish the building and this land could be added to QCP's current Welcome to Penn Hills Sign. The CDC proposes to then recruit volunteer efforts to landscape and maintain the green space.



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- 3. Business Landscaping Improvements** – The CDC has identified Ferraco Landscaping as a potential source for landscaping advice and fair maintenance prices for landscaping improvements along Rodi Road. The CDC will encourage landscaping and maintenance through its Golden Broom Awards. The CDC will also work with the Planning Department and the Planning Commission in an effort to appropriately regulate land development.



- 4. Shade Trees** - Over the years and for no particular reason developers have primarily planted Honey Locust trees and Bradford Pear trees along their frontage. The CDC is not suggesting that we adopt these as our official Rodi Road shade tree but as time goes on we may take into account that these are there already in certain numbers and that it may be in the community's interest to develop a formal policy. We do recommend that we encourage any program or activity that adds shade trees to the Rodi Road frontage. They will only add to the corridor's attraction.

### **Promote Efforts to Control Storm water and Solve Flooding Problems:**

- 1. The Penn Hills Shopping Center** - The Penn Hills shopping Center has too much uncontrolled impervious surface. We need to work with the owners to develop a long range plan for reducing stormwater runoff and decreasing acceleration of runoff. Preliminary meetings with students from CMU and First City Management have been positive. The CDC plans to follow up. If we see an opportunity to apply for any grant funds to help the owners we should do so. This plan includes some preliminary sketches to show where storm water retention would have a minimum affect on available parking. A meeting with First City Management would be in order. A state grant to help with the expense would be wonderful.



- 2. Other Storm Water Retention Areas** - The traditional victims of flooding along Duff's Run are Kalmeyer Associates, Brentanos, Pennysaver, Big Brothers, Airtite (Serendipity and Avis), Parko, and Flynn's Tire. They will most likely be willing to team with us or encourage any program that will reduce storm water runoff. They all blame the PH Shopping Center and occasionally an upstream owner for not clearing the stream of debris. This plan identifies the vacant land immediately south of Dunkin Donut and the Sunoco at Rodi and Tulip as potential retention areas. The CDC realizes that local government and businesses lack the resources to develop retention areas but we would support efforts to find funding for this purpose. The CDC will lobby the Penn Hills Council and Penn DOT to seek funding for this purpose. If an opportunity arises for the CDC to directly apply for funding for this purpose we would recommend that we do this.

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- 3. Rain Barrels** – The CDC has spent a considerable amount of time investigating the use of rain barrels in controlling storm water runoff. The CMU students identified this method and encouraged their deployment. The CDC met with representatives of the Nine Mile Run Watershed and learned from their experience in the nearby Pittsburgh/Squirrel Hill area. The CDC recommends that every home owner in the Duff’s Run watershed install a rain barrel. The CDC realizes, however, that this is not a realistic project without a grant or an unexpected source of funding. The price of a good rain barrel is currently beyond the means of the average Penn Hills family when listed with other household expenses during a rough economy. The CDC will continue to look for opportunities to promote rain barrels and educate the public on their benefits to the community but we do not expect their immediate deployment in large numbers.



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- 4. Financing Storm Water Management** – The CDC recognizes the problems with funding storm water management projects. State government takes little or no responsibility even though Rodi Road is a state maintained road. The local government simply does not have the resources, and neither can private businesses afford the cost. The CDC recommends that we all look for collective ways to raise the funds. We recommend that businesses start to budget for storm water management, that government continue to monitor possible grant programs and that citizens prepare themselves for assessments, fees, or taxes. This plan recommends that Penn Hills begin to establish Capital Budget accounts for storm water management, that Penn DOT take on a share of responsibility beyond their present curb to curb policy, and that we all consider the creation of a Storm Water Management Fund to be funded with whatever resources become available, including impact fees, property assessments, local taxes, and state and federal grants. This plan recommends that we begin with grant applications for funding to film the entire length of Duff’s Run and that we prepare engineering specifications for capital projects.



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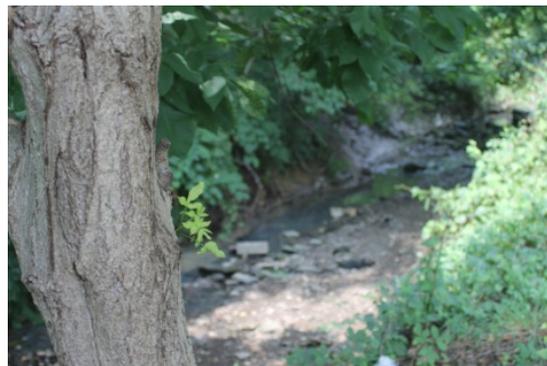
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- 5. Stormwater Education** – The CDC recognizes that, in partnership with local government, it can take on a supporting role in educating the general public on the problems and issues related to storm water management. We need to educate the general population of Penn Hills about the stormwater problems along Rodi Road. There are several businesses (Sterling Auto Body, Advanced Auto, Flynn’s Tire, and others) that have done their share in controlling run off by installing underground retention but many are unaware of this. Other businesses that currently have no retention facilities should consider doing their part and our residents need to consider helping to pay for stormwater controls. Our children and most of our families do not know the purpose of a rain barrel or the function of a storm water retention area, but they all know that when the road gets flooded they have to face a detour. The CDC can acquire and distribute storm water management materials at public meetings and appropriate events.

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**6. Improve Culvert Efficiency and Stream Capacity:**

- a. Open clogged storm inlets at the entrance roads to the shopping center. This would prevent water from running from the driveways directly onto Rodi. The previous Duff's Run Study stated that PennDot is responsible since they allowed the driveway permit to be issued without the properly designed drains.
- b. Improve the culvert crossing under Rodi near Long Printing. This is Structure No. 5 in the Duff's Run Report and was their first priority. At the time of the report it was estimated to only be able to pass the 5-year storm. It was built in the 1920s.
- c. Appoint a subcommittee or task force to focus on the Rodi Stormwater issue.
- d. Walk down Duff run and inspect measure, photograph each culvert, note conditions in a field log. Walk through the larger culverts and note any crushing, obstructions, poor joints etc.
- e. Contact Turtle Creek Watershed Association, PADEP, Penndot, Business owners, Corps of engineers, local government to have a meeting to discuss options.
- f. Have the Municipality write a letter to Penndot to ask that they replace Culvert #5. Also try to make the case that Penndot is responsible to install trench grates at the entrance of Penn Hills Shopping Center, as described in Section 6a.
- g. Airtite owners put a cage over the end of a nearby culvert to keep debris out. The cage gets clogged with debris and causes a backup. This was evidently done as a self-defense activity after the owner experienced heavy damages. The Municipality asked this property owner to maintain the entrance to this culvert, to periodically remove debris and commit to constantly monitor and maintain this opening. Future plans should provide a better and more permanent solution.
- h. Organize a Stream Cleanup with CDC and other volunteers to remove trash and branches from the stream to prevent culverts from getting clogged. The Municipality's Department of Public Works could help with trucks, and the property owners could donate dumpsters. This should be done annually to keep up with the new trash that will accumulate. Permits are not necessary for cleaning out a stream. Only grading and dredging would require a permit.
- i. Increase the capacity of the existing culverts by adding headwalls or shaped inlets to those culverts with projecting inlets. The entrance loss coefficients could be reduced from 0.9 to 0.25 by adding end treatments. This would allow more water to flow through the existing culverts.
- j. Create a Public Private Partnership between the various property owners and the Municipality to upgrade the culverts. For example Penn Hills and the property owner could agree to repair or replace the inadequate culverts and share the cost. The rationale is while the culverts are on private property they are affecting others properties and only the Municipality can act to maintain the general welfare of the citizens.



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**7. Promote Code Enforcement and Improved Property Maintenance:**

a. **Code Violations** – The notion of more rigorous Code Enforcement has been discussed at most Penn Hills CDC meetings whether it be the Beautification Committee, the Housing Committee, or this Economic Development Committee. This plan recognizes that most of the properties along the Rodi Road Corridor are well maintained and in compliance with local codes. We recommend that these property owners and the community in general be protected with code enforcement activity directed at those who don't fit in this category. We recommend that the CDC begin to keep a record of Rodi Road property complaints, that we offer assistance to property owners in processing these complaints, and that the CDC tracks them through abatement. Areas suggested for code enforcement monitoring include:

1. Rubbish and debris, improper dumpster control or required screening
2. Vegetation control, mowing lawns, managing weeds, trimming shrubs
3. Structural appearance, peeling paint, unsightly facades
4. Signs, too many temporary signs and/or banners
5. Sidewalk and parking lot maintenance

b. **Other Property Maintenance Issues** – The CDC recognizes that Rodi Road businesses have a wide variety of needs and maintenance budgets to deal with these concerns but we have invited local landscaping companies to work with us and Rodi Road property owners toward improved landscaping and maintenance. So far Ferraco Landscaping has come forward to offer assistance and advice. This could lead to group purchasing arrangements, shared maintenance expenses, or simply good advice.

The CDC Economic Development Committee has agreed to adopt the corridor in terms of litter control. We will, of course, invite the participation of all property owners and other groups working on litter control programs.

c. **The Golden Broom Award** – Not all maintenance activity need be negative. The CDC proposes and indeed has already begun a Golden Broom Award Program to recognize the businesses in the Rodi Road Corridor that are doing an outstanding job of continuous property maintenance. Eat-N-Park was the first award for the month of October 2011, the Reproductive Health Services was second in November of 2011 and others will follow and be recognized. This award will travel each month and hopefully the associated publicity will promote additional improved property maintenance activity.



d. **Stream Dredging** – Many of the corridor businesses have asked for Duff's Run to be dredged. The CDC proposes to meet with the Municipality, and DEP if necessary, to determine the merits of this activity. It certainly appears that the Penn Hills Dept of Public Works could provide welcome assistance in this regard but there is some sentiment that dredging is problematic for downstream properties.

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## **Other Corridor Activities:**

- 1. Sidewalks** – The Municipality will require sidewalks at new developments as time goes on but in some cases we should consider moving on and not waiting, especially when filling in some missing links could have a tremendous impact. One of these areas could be the west side of Rodi from Duff to the shopping center. Many sidewalks are in place and the benefit seems to be genuine. The pathways worn by foot traffic are one indication of need, the recent death of a pedestrian on Rodi is another. We should consider recommending a capital project to the Mayor and Council with fair assessments levied on adjacent owners. The time to do this would be the Capital Program hearings in the fall. The Planning Department has already included sidewalks in next year's CD Program. The CDC could support this effort.
- 2. Rodi/Maple Intersection** – Currently Mr. D'Andrea and the Municipalities of Penn Hills and Wilkins are working together to improve this intersection and introduce a traffic control light. The current traffic control officer is a temporary measure and not a good solution. Allegheny County has chipped in a grant toward the cost of the improvements and this, combined with private money, is currently at work toward installing a new traffic light. The County also owns the vacant gas station at the corner. The future of this parcel has yet to be determined. We recommend that the County donate the property to the CDC or Penn Hills as green space and that it be landscaped to enhance our entrance from the Parkway to Penn Hills. Upon completion of the traffic improvements we expect Vocollect and Mr. D'Andrea to lobby for a zoning change to build a new building on land in Penn Hills currently zoned residential. It has been reported that the proposed development would bring approximately 200 engineering jobs to Penn Hills. The CDC should consider formal support for this zoning change and new development.



## **Implementation/Conclusions**

The EDC plans to continue to build upon and improve this study. We now ask the general CDC membership, Rodi Road property owners, the Penn Hills Planning Commission, the Penn Hills Council, and the community in general for support. We welcome comments from all readers and invite you to join us in our efforts to promote improvements in the corridor and quality economic development in general.