ETNA—FROM INDUSTRY TO ARTS AND THE ENVIRONMENT...

Etna Borough is a community in change. The small, former steel mill town, with a population of 3,432, is once again, in the midst of transformation. Many times, Etna has had to adjust to internal and external forces that have caused significant change. The first was the closing of the steel mills located in Etna. The last closed in 1960. Job and population loss were substantial and with that came economic decline. In 1958, major regional transportation projects were undertaken by PA DOT, which also changed the composition of our community. The Route 28 project, which connected the City of Pittsburgh with the Allegheny Valley, cut right through our community and over 400 homes, including whole streets, were taken and demolished for construction of this road. The State Route 8 widening project completed in 2004, took an additional 41 properties, both residential and commercial, further shrinking our tax base. Significant population loss and a major blow to our tax base, along with the loss of businesses became “the Perfect Storm.” This convergence of opportunities has taken Etna to the next level in our community development.

Etna is at the bottom of the Pine Creek watershed, a 67-square mile drainage area, with .67 of a square mile being in Etna. Decades of upstream development brought increased stormwater issues to the already overburdened valley town. In the aftermath of Hurricane Ivan in 2004, a great part of our region, including the Pine Creek communities, upstream and downstream, were hit with devastating floods.

After this catastrophe, we began to work closely with upstream municipalities on ways to partner to improve the quality of life for our residents, targeting stormwater management on a watershed level. We formed the North Hills Council of Governments Stormwater Management Committee and began undertaking the task of adopting an Act 167 update, a multi-municipal Stormwater Management Ordinance. Our work resulted in a Watershed Implementation Plan (WIP) for Pine Creek, which was subsequently approved by the DEP. In the WIP projects were detailed on ways communities could improve water quality in Pine Creek. Etna, a small urbanized community, wanted to make sure that it, too, was part of the solution. We studied the feasibility of doing regional downspout disconnects in our tightly knit business district with large concentrated roof areas. As a permitted, combined sewer community, during heavy rainfall and snowmelt, our system overflows to Pine Creek. Disconnecting downspouts could help lessen the frequency and severity of discharges to the stream as well as localized street and basement flooding. We developed a Green Streets Program for our business district for the WIP. Subsequently, through Growing Greener 319 funds, we have been able to secure grants to design and construct two phases of that program, removing around 1,300,000 gallons of stormwater annually from our sewer system. We rehabilitated a public parking lot, installing a large infiltration bed, which removes an additional 173,000 gallons a year.

Etna made stormwater management a priority in all of its planning processes. In 2014, we adopted a Green Master Plan for the community, identifying areas where stormwater removal and infiltration could and should occur. Three projects from this Plan are already constructed and functioning. In 2015, we began working on a new comprehensive plan and made stormwater management a focus in the planning process.
We adopted River Bend, which identifies previously industrially developed properties along the stream that could, in the long-term, become stormwater management areas and greenspace for the community. River Bend continues to address remnants of our industrial past, which reside alongside and, in places, directly within our commercial and residential neighborhoods in creative, yet realistic and sustainable ways.

In addition to stormwater management, Etna is currently working on developing our riverfront property, formerly an old sand and gravel plant along the Allegheny River into the Etna Riverfront Park and Trail. This area is an industrial wasteland. Our Riverfront Park Plan, adopted in 2016, calls for greenspace, an overlook, trail and rain gardens for stormwater management and wildlife habitat. This trail will eventually connect up and downstream into a larger trail system. Etna developed the Dougherty Veteran’s Nature Trail along Pine Creek, which allows gorgeous views of the valley slopes along the creek and is home to blue heron and kingfishers, completing the project in 2009 and learning the value our residents placed on open greenspace in our urban environment.

We are embracing a burgeoning artist community, having just hosted our third annual Art Tour. We have seen a renewed interest in walkable communities with a centralized business district, and work closely with our non-profit agency, the Etna Economic Development Corporation to make our business district walkable, attractive and sustainable. We have an active recreation facility, which includes a municipal swimming pool, deck hockey rink, basketball courts and playground. Our ballfields are utilized throughout the spring, summer and fall seasons. We embrace our mixed-use community, which houses a well-established industrial park, two commercial business districts, and a mixture of housing from apartments to lovely pre-World War II brick homes. Our town houses companies that work world-wide such as Forms and Surfaces who manufacture products for large international technology companies, Global Access Control Systems, who provided security for the Democratic and Republican national conventions as well as Pope Francis’ visit and Extexh Inc., who manufactured the KINETICWALL (wave wall) at the Pittsburgh Children’s Museum and just finished a similar job at the Boston Logan Airport.

We have a strong volunteer base in our community, including the Etna Neighborhood Association, who sponsor events like Community Day, Free Movies in the Park and a fun filled Light the Night celebration. Etna is a designated Live Well Allegheny community, a Pennsylvania Silver Certified Sustainable Community and a 2017 Banner Community through the Allegheny League of Municipalities. Our Welcome Signs say, “Etna, Where Community Matters” – and those are words we live by in our actions and our plans to make this community healthier and more sustainable for generations to come.

Photos:
1. Etna Riverfront Park Plan Rendering
2. Etna Riverfront Park Property
3. Etna Streetscape After
4. Etna Streetscape Before
5. Etna Nature Trail
6. Etna Swimming Pool