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Nov. 22, 2023

The Honorable Rick Siger - Secretary
PA Department of Community and Economic Development
Commonwealth Keystone Building
400 North Street, 4th Floor
Harrisburg, PA 17120-0225

RE: Inaugural "Secretary's Award for Municipal Excellence" for Johnstown

Dear Secretary Siger,

I digested with great interest the recent announcement that you will bestow DCED's inaugural "Secretary's Award for Municipal Excellence" to Johnstown, hosting a ceremony and luncheon Nov. 30 at the local Holiday Inn to "celebrate a city on the rise."

As the state representative whose district includes Johnstown, my definition of "municipal excellence" must be based on far different criteria than what you and your department's executive team used to make this determination.

Anyone who has followed the news for the past year is aware of the depth and breadth of serious problems plaguing Johnstown – and it is way premature to say there has been "municipal excellence" in terms of serious and effective efforts to solve them.

For your perusal and professional enlightenment, I am attaching a copy of a recent federal SAMHSA ReCast grant proposal that offers this assessment of "municipal excellence" in Johnstown:

- **"Johnstown, the poorest city in Pennsylvania, has reached a peak of community trauma in the past 24 months as a massive transfer of extremely low-income, transient public housing residents and families have sought safe and affordable housing in Johnstown public housing complexes, which has an overabundance of public housing units available. This has caused the Cambria County and Johnstown public health, social services, educational, and law enforcement systems to come to the point of collapse, and brought a genuine humanitarian crisis to this small, rural community."**
- **"The community trauma is not borne by the transient families alone, but by the entire community as public schools are disrupted, public health workers quit from compassion and other fatigue leaving these systems under capacity, violent crime makes people afraid to go to downtown Johnstown, and stable families flee the community for good."**
- **"Making matters worse, a recent spike in violent murders has been linked to the transient population, with 15 homicides in Cambria County from 2021 to 2022 alone a 66% increase over the pre-COVID 2018-2019 period. Escalating community violence exacerbates existing collective traumas."**

- **“There are currently over 2,000 public and Section 8 housing units in Cambria County, the majority of which are in the City of Johnstown. This means that over 20% of the City’s population live in affordable housing units based on a 2.2 person/unit average. For comparison, only 2.1% of the national population live in public and Section 8 housing.”**
- **“Johnstown’s poverty rate is 38.7%, more than three times Pennsylvania’s 12.8% rate ... 43.8% of households receive food stamps, more than triple the 13.2% state and 12.2% national reciprocity rates ... A relative surplus of public housing is one of the main suspected drivers of such a high poverty rate.”**
- **“In the 2020-2021 school year Greater Johnstown School District, with a total student enrollment of 3,023, had 800 transient students. Behavioral issues, including truancies and expulsions, as a result of the 25% transient population hinder the learning experience of all students. Local human service providers absorb the financial burden of this phenomenon due to the vast need of these high-risk individuals (mainly single mothers, extended family, and children) moving for a temporary duration with few belongings or community connections.”**

There is more to Johnstown’s stark, real-world reality that would say there is little to no cause for celebration of excellence.

According to GJSD Superintendent Amy Arcurio, 97% of Johnstown school district students are economically disadvantaged and receiving free or reduced lunches. Johnstown’s homeless shelters are overflowing, and homeless families are forced to shelter in downtown hotels. The Greater Johnstown School District has directed its bus drivers to create a new bus stop at the Johnstown Econo Lodge to pick up homeless students who live at the hotel. This year the City of Johnstown lost its only downtown grocery store and its only downtown pharmacy, leaving the locals (mostly poor elderly) to use public transit to take long bus rides to buy food and medication. Also, the state has decided to move the public assistance office out of the city to Upper Yoder Township, losing another 40-plus jobs in the city. The Johnstown Public Safety Building has at times over 4 feet of water in its basement, creating a public health hazard.

Instead of addressing these issues, Johnstown officials recently made the decision to spend \$6 million to \$8 million of their federal COVID-19 American Rescue Plan funds to completely reconstruct Central Park. This money could have gone to solidify a grocery store downtown, build a new police station, or tear down 650 abandoned homes.

Unless there is real, documentable progress on these and many other issues, a “feel-good” award from your office amounts to nothing more than a participation trophy, as Johnstown needs way more than a plaque on the wall to fix its deep-rooted problems.

After your window-dressing celebration of “Johnstown, a community where government, nonprofits, businesses, and residents are driving the momentum for transformative change” is over, I welcome the opportunity to meet with you and your executive team to seriously discuss and formulate real plans to address the city’s problems.

Sincerely,



State Rep. Frank Burns
72nd Legislative District