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WALKABOUT

Fifth, Forbes and a fork in the road

At his Fifth and Forbes news conference on Monday, Mayor Tom Murphy declared it time for all negative people to stand aside so the city "can move forward."

In case you've tuned in late, the mayor and a cadre of planners and city officials have kicked off a public discussion about the spitting up of our semi-raggedy Downtown.

When he left the microphone, a heckler from the ranks, behind the TV cameras, yelled "Yeah, but you'll tax the negative people, won't you? That's what they're good for, not for their opinions."

The heckler is one of the anti-tax majority who believe they shouldn't have to pay taxes for anything they don't approve of. They hold to mythical notions about property rights and what freedom means. They are the pure of heart, the simplistic, the idealistic and, at the same time, the cynical, expecting that at every turn, authority will take advantage of them, lie to them, give them access only at the last minute. When everything's already pretty much decided, I actually appreciate these people; there's a little bit of them in me. But being strident on this issue seems the height of simple-mindedness.

If it's too easy to see both sides: If you're against Murphy's plan, you're satisfied to walk a shabby, dumpier corridor that, if it isn't doing listless business, sure looks as if it is. If you're gung-ho in Murphy's corner, you may be willing to accept what my colleague Bill Steigerwald has referred to as "demographic cleansing." It's a strong term and implies an intent that may not be there, but dislocations have had sinister ramifications historically.

That said, I checked to see how the African-American Chamber of Commerce feels about all this. African Americans

patronize many of the stores targeted for change.

Doris Carson Williams, whose chamber counts 200 members, said she feels hopeful since meeting with City Councilman Sala Udin and Urban Retail Properties.

"My job is to help forge plans," she said. "The truth is, a lot of people are going to be moving." One of her clients and a soon-to-be client both want to move into the development corridor. At this point, she believes they should, and can. "If we're successful in working as a team on this, we can make all the moves positive."

"I think for our city these are exciting times." In most places I've ever lived or visited, you can get away with saying something like that without sounding like Pollyanna. But after 10 years in Pittsburgh, the subtle sacrifice of positivism has had its effect on me. In response to Williams, I thought, "She's a tad optimistic."

But these are exciting times, even while they're fraught with anger and debate. If the mayor is true to his word, you and I can still have some impact.

My concerns about Fifth and Forbes are myriad, starting with the loss of so many architectural gems. How can we make such a wholesale mistake with our landmark heritage again? Who are we if we don't bear a semblance of our past? This is my most passionate plea, but I also worry that re-locations won't benefit the re-located. Do we have enough people who can afford regular forays into FAO Schwartz and Nordstrom's? If stores and restaurants really do stay open late, will enough people who now drive home to Mars, Apollo and Moon at 5 p.m. even care?

But, at the risk of sounding how I'll sound, I can't imagine that Tom Murphy cares less than I do about all this, except for the architecture. I prefer to believe he and his team have studied the possibilities exhaustively. If I spent most of a day mulling the parking issue, they have spent a little time mulling it, too. I choose to believe they have been painstaking and will get more right than they get wrong.

Besides, after all the urban-reinvention miscues of the past, they wouldn't dare set a course that would give us reason, 25 years from now, to say, "Oh man, another redevelopment screw-up" — would they?

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