

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

BERNADETTE DOUGHERTY

RESOURCES FOR EDUCATION AND ACTION FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH
IN AMBLER (REACH Ambler)

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

Lee Sullivan Berry

at

Bernadette Dougherty's home
Ambler, Pennsylvania

on

8 January 2014

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

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ABSTRACT

Bernadette Dougherty grew up in Abington, Pennsylvania, moving to Ambler after her marriage. She attended Temple University, Ambler, for two years, returning later to complete a degree in community and regional planning. Her family still lives nearby.

In addition to having three young children, Dougherty became active in the Wissahickon Valley Historical Society, for whom she wrote the history of Ambler's second hundred years. She served on the Borough of Ambler Council for two years, during which time she helped save the movie theater and the train station, two historic buildings. She served on a number of other boards. When the asbestos plant closed, Ambler's economy declined, and Dougherty was galvanized into action, attempting to recruit new and save old businesses and buildings. She bought property herself, attracting in a coffee shop and a brewpub. When she served on the Zoning Board she was able to get the rail corridor rezoned residential, with the result that there is now much more housing, all filled. She joined the Main Street project, writing a grant proposal for state funds, and eventually she became project manager. During this time of property management Dougherty became more concerned about the hazards of asbestos. Developers who proposed a seventeen-story high-rise on what is now BoRit Asbestos Area lobbied Dougherty hard; at first she was in favor of it, but when the developers disparaged the citizens' intelligence and knowledge regarding the asbestos, she turned against the project.

This high-rise project caused residents to form a protest group that became an EPA community advisory group (CAG), and they were able to get the site listed on the National Priorities List. Dougherty was on the future use committee of the CAG, and felt that the members were well-informed and involved. She has found the EPA thorough and is comfortable with their decisions. She believes very strongly that capping is preferred to removal; that capping would remove what little concern she feels about asbestos.

Dougherty thinks that her community and regional planning degree has given her insight into what questions to ask. As a result she thinks that perhaps flooding [of Wissahickon Creek] is a greater danger than asbestos, assuming proper remediation. She hopes more citizens will become involved; she recommends that other communities with similar problems become aware and involved early. She would like to see the waterfowl preserve established and a park rebuilt. She thinks the residents nearest BoRit should have most involvement and input. Dougherty cites Sharon McCormick and Gordon Beck as good examples. Most crucial is to ask if the community is better off with the remediation than before it.

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<p>Two years on Borough of Ambler Council. Helped save movie theater and train station. Member of numerous boards. Explosion at AmChem, consequent evacuation. Decline of Ambler after closing of asbestos plant. Working on regional development; asbestos an impediment. Worried about moving asbestos-containing waste; wanted BoRit site capped. Learned about asbestos hazard when on board of Historical Society. Preserved historical buildings, converted to commercial use. Bought some property herself. Brought in new businesses, including brewpub and coffee shop. None of her property near White Mountains.</p>	
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<p>Joined Main Street project; became manager. Wrote grant for state funds. Lobbying from developers for high-rise project. At first in favor of it, then against when asbestos problem pooh-poohed. Originally separate from Borough Council; now Council and mayor heavily involved.</p>	
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<p>Not member of Citizens for a Better Ambler, but was on future use committee of community advisory group (CAG). Thinks CAGs inherently limited in power, but BoRit CAG more effective than most; members informed and involved. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) nearly done with feasibility study of BoRit site. Hopes for capping, not removal. Pleased about reservoir approval; would like park restored. Feels asbestos a concern only when recruiting new businesses. More concerned about flooding in Whitplain Township, revitalization plans for burned-out houses.</p>	
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<p>Knows better what questions to ask, which answers are flim-flam, because of degree. Got rail corridor rezoned for residential buildings; housing development all sold. Believes EPA's work thorough, decisions good; acceptable levels of risk. Hopes that BoRit site will reopen as park and waterfowl preserve. Thinks high-rise site should be capped. Would like everyone to be more involved, flooding problems solved. Believes nearby residents not involved enough, but should have input about remediation. Lessons for others: pay attention, get involved, and do so early.</p>	
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