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Bethlehem's Distinction a Long Time in the Making

For two decades, Bethlehem endured a distinction that its community leader would have preferred to avoid. As the nation's second-largest steelmaker shed thousands of jobs and withered into bankruptcy, the city became a national symbol of the death of manufacturing.

However, it was how Bethlehem responded to the end of Bethlehem Steel that made it the first city named by Lehigh Valley Planning Commission as a Community of Distinction, in 2014.

Now Bethlehem will be able to share its honor with people entering the city with Community of Distinction road signs, presented Wednesday to the city by the LVPC.

"The overall impact has been dramatic and sustainable. Not only has one of the largest brownfields sites in the nation become home to SteelStacks and Sands Casino – regional attractions that have spurred thousands of jobs and planted the seed for further development -- but home values and incomes in South Bethlehem have increased," LVPC Board Chairman Stephen Repasch said during a sign unveiling ceremony at Bethlehem Town Hall. "Rather than be held back by the economic devastation of losing its major employer, Bethlehem is a community that has proudly soldiered on, mindful of its history, while extending its legacy of innovation and productivity well into the 21st Century. "

Speakers during the ceremony included LVPC board members Repasch and Mike Gibson, Executive Director Becky Bradley, Bethlehem Mayor Robert Donchez and Northampton County Executive Lamont McClure.

"We've always had a very good partnership between the city and LVPC," Mayor Donchez said. "We appreciate the gift. We'll put it in a very visible place."

Bethlehem not only used a master development plan that included an innovative tax increment financing district to redevelop nearly 2,000 acres of former Bethlehem Steel brownfields, but it has revitalized the South Side where 30,000 steelworkers were once employed to include an urban greenway, one of the region's largest skate parks and a thriving business district, to go along with its bustling historic district on the North Side.

South Bethlehem is now home to one of the region's largest industrial parks, the \$900 million Sands Casino and the SteelStacks entertainment and concert complex.

"Not only did you achieve what you did to win this award in 2014, but you've kept that momentum," Bradley said. "It really speaks to your commitment to success."

For the past four years during its annual Planning & Development Gala, the LVPC has named one Community of Distinction each year for their commitment to sound planning that makes the region a better place.

Bethlehem's initial designation in 2014, was followed by Bushkill Township in 2015, South Whitehall Township in 2016 and Catasauqua Borough in 2017.

The first sign presentation was August 27 in Catasauqua

Future presentations will be made September 19 in South Whitehall Township and October 4 in Bushkill Township.

This year's 5th Annual Lehigh Valley Gala + Awards is scheduled for October 10 at DeSales University Center. More than two dozen communities have been nominated for awards.

More information is available by contacting LVPC Managing Editor Matt Assad at 610-264-4544, or massad@lvpc.org.