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Viewpoint: Neighborhood assistance program is critical to community revitalization in the Pittsburgh region

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For our region to grow in a sustainable way, and to elevate, attract and retain the diversity of workers necessary to fuel our economy, it is critical that we re-focus attention on the needs of historically disinvested communities in our region. The Allegheny Conference on Community Development has re-embraced community development on its agenda in recent years and is moving forward to expand efforts to build off of recent success. This includes helping to lead the statewide NAP Coalition, which is advocating for an expansion of the Neighborhood Assistance Program (NAP).

Communities in need across our region and state are benefiting from NAP, a state tax credit program that creates partnerships between the business community, government and grassroots community development organizations. Last year, more than \$7 million was awarded through NAP to 40 nonprofit, community organizations in southwestern Pennsylvania. This funding is critical to enabling these grassroots organizations to grow jobs, build capacity, improve business districts and housing, and address blight in their communities.



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Today, conference members are utilizing NAP to contribute \$2.5 million annually to seven underserved communities in the region — Connellsville, Homewood, McKees Rocks, Mt. Oliver/Knoxville, Sharpsburg, Washington and Wilkinsburg. These communities, selected for their strong community planning and growth potential, have greatly benefited from the investments and partnerships leveraged through NAP over the past five years.

In McKees Rocks, the historic Roxian Theater, built in 1928, has been vacant since 2003. Now, thanks to the McKees Rocks Community Development Corporation (MRCDC), and made possible by NAP, the Roxian will soon be reborn as a key regional music venue and an economic anchor for McKees Rocks. The MRCDC recently completed the sale of the theater to entrepreneur John Pergal. The newly restored 1,400-seat theater will act as a catalyst to spur additional development in McKees Rocks.

Another project that has advanced thanks to investments and partnerships leveraged through NAP is the restoration of the Wilkinsburg Train Station. The historic train station, which has sat empty for more than 40 years, is closer to being restored as a community asset than ever before. The Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation (WCDC), which gets its funding through NAP, has retained an architectural firm and secured initial funding to keep the restoration project on track to be completed in the near future. Once restored, the WCDC expects the train station to be a community anchor.

Opening in May, The Bakery Society Pittsburgh (TBSP) will be the region's first bakery incubator. Located in the former Kullman's Bakery in Mt. Oliver, TBSP will put aspiring bakery entrepreneurs through a comprehensive, 18-month program that will teach them a broad range of skills essential to launching a baking career. TBSP is the brainchild of Economic Development South, which is using NAP tax credit funding to revitalize the Brownsville Road business district and to bring career training to Mt. Oliver and the broader region.

These projects are just a few of the many regional successes made possible by NAP. With additional public-private investment, these communities, and others like them, can share in our region's prosperity and offer a new level of opportunity.

NAP needs to be expanded for more communities across our region and state to have access to this critical community development funding tool. With a cap set at \$18 million per year, NAP gets the same level of funding as when it was created 44 years ago. Yet in recent years, it has seen nearly \$50 million in annual requests (and matching corporate commitments of funding), meaning more than half had to be rejected as a result of the program's funding cap.

Legislation in the state Senate and House, SB 512 and HB 645, would double the cap on the tax credits from \$18 million to \$36 million per year. This proposed increase in NAP tax credits will have an enormous impact on the people who live and work in Pennsylvania's most struggling communities. It's time for lawmakers in Harrisburg to raise the cap on the program and support critical efforts to strengthen communities across our region and state.