Letters to the Editor
letters@njherald.com
By Christopher Wink
Philadelphia, Pa.
215-253-1406
christopher.wink@gmail.com
624 words

The future vibrancy of Newton and, as its seat of government, Sussex County, will largely be won or lost with the success of Spring Street, a primary cultural and commercial corridor for much of the last 150 years.

I don't live in Sussex County anymore, so my opinion might not matter much to some, but I did grow up here. I am a 2004 graduate of Newton High School, I still have family and friends here and I often share about the special qualities of northwest New Jersey whenever I can in Philadelphia, where I live now.

With that distance from Newton, I return to Spring Street and see thrilling possibilities.

I applaud what our community leaders have already helped build over years: the holiday parade traditions; the reimagined Newton Theater, restaurants like Trinity Lounge, Bula, Andre's and nearby Narin Thai; the growing number of small boutiques; as well as welcoming Thorlabs as an anchor for live-work walkable living.

This trend is happening nationwide: a sweeping push for denser, urban inspired living. Young people today are driving less while seeking more in-person social connections in public settings, since we are marrying and buying homes later in life, if at all.

This is a great opportunity for a town like Newton and a place like Spring Street. Our historic roots make us ideally suited to attract and retain young people because we have employers, bars and restaurants and a beautiful, dense housing stock. Elsewhere, suburban communities are recreating town squares and Main Street corridors like the ones we already have. We must prepare for this next generation and not lose ground to those trying to emulate our authentic past.

In Philadelphia and other big cities, I have watched previously blighted commercial corridors become destinations again through programs from community development corporations that buy up lagging storefronts and develop strategies for below-market-rate leasing for anchor tenants that attract foot traffic. It's a loss-leader for corridor development. Think how Newton Theater, the clothing shops and the restaurants might be helped if a coffee shop with regular poetry readings, an art gallery with local openings and a rotating incubation spot for a new local entrepreneur were added to otherwise vacant windows on Spring Street.

We want activity morning, noon and night, every day of the week and the mixed-use businesses to sustain it.

To do that, we also should focus on a return to high-quality residential units above storefronts and near Spring Street to increase pedestrian presence. Then when we fill the storefronts and add high-quality residents, let's welcome people there at night, like in the day. Make Spring Street a pedestrian mall for First Fridays this summer and encourage the restaurants to have outdoor seating in the street.

If we want to attract and retain the next generation of residents and leaders for Newton and Sussex County, making Spring Street vital and vibrant will be a leading tool. Of course there are other challenges, like property taxes, balancing parking with density and a shortage of low income housing, but seeing an active town square like that of Morristown is a reminder of what is attainable. There are pathways to success, so let's follow them.

The Newton and Sussex County Chambers of Commerce, the Sussex County Arts and Heritage Council, the region's Small Business Development Center and Newton Rotary, along with our public officials, like Congressman Scott Garrett, Mayor Joseph A. Ricciardo and town council, among other leaders, need to focus on what Spring Street can be, not just settle with what it already is. Judging by much of the great work that has begun, I am sure they can, but let's remember that we all will benefit by continuing to make Spring Street more of a destination.

Christopher Wink
Philadelphia, Pa
Newton High School, Class of 2004