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Bethlehem Steel Plant or Party Plant

The year is 1863, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania and the Bethlehem steel plant has just opened to being operations. Providing manufactured steel for railroads, construction, and buildings, the plant operated on 1600 acres of land in front of Lehigh River. Fast forward 152 years, that same steel plant has now become a tourist attraction and commerce center. (Papa) A place that once heard cries, sweat of grim employment, and even death from the workers is now a place to gamble, conduct, and view history. The decision to reconstruct the Bethlehem Steel Plant has been interpreted in two contrasting opinions; that it was a ruinous decision destroying history or a positive choice that reaped positive rewards.

In 2006, the Lehigh Valley Industrial Park and HDR Engineering was honored with the Phoenix Award for their efforts toward innovative redevelopment. (Smith) "Winning projects offer a fresh take on solving significant problems, show innovation and demonstrate masterful community impact." (Phoenix Awards) The steel plant was transformed into a commerce center, where it will house many of the HDR Engineering employees whilst creating new job opportunities for the people of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. "It is estimated that at full build out, the Bethlehem Commerce Center will generate in excess of \$1.5 billion in new investment and add 6,000 new jobs to the Lehigh Valley with an annual payroll of \$210 million." (Smith) The creation of new jobs helped lower the unemployment rate, create a flourishing home for residents, and improve the health and happiness of the town while recycling the use of an old building.

In 2009, a gambling facility opened inside of the old steel mill. Inside the casino are 3,000 slot machines and four restaurants. "The mayor said he expected the casino, the largest in Pennsylvania, to draw more than 4.5 million visitors a year and provide about \$9 million to the city's general fund" (Friess) With this renewal of the Bethlehem Steel Plant, the expectation is a boost in economy for the town. While part of the building had to be modified or destroyed, the construction plans for the casino attempted to preserve the integrity of the steel plant that had once operated. Some residents feel the changes made has brought more attention to the history and respected the vestige of the plant.

After a few years passed from the opening of the casino, the town saw improvements in the economy, but nothing drastic. Many locals resisted the casino construction because they felt it would ruin the community. There was worry that the crime rate would go up, the environment would become unsafe for children, and few residents did not want their home to become a tourist attraction. "In Bethlehem, in the five years since the casino opened their crime rate has roughly stayed the same, it's lowered property taxes and stabilized the city's finances, but it has not become an economic catalyst for the rest of the city." (Walsh) While crime statistics show no real difference, a part of the population has not appreciated its presence in the town they love.

While the economy of the town was attempted to be saved by the changes, so was the environment in Bethlehem. While the Bethlehem Steel Plant had been operating as a steel plant from 1863 through 1995, it had detrimental effects to the soil and water supply. The ground water could not be used as drinking water due to contamination. "The primary contaminants in the groundwater are PAHs (polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons), and solvents, such as TCE (Trichloroethylene) and tetrachloroethane. The main contaminants in the soil are PAHs, solvents and heavy metals like arsenic and lead." (Papa) With the restoration of the steel plant, came the environment clean-up which remediated the soil and groundwater to healthy conditions. Not only was the change powerful to the economy, it also resolved environmental issues.

Another concern during reconstruction was that the plans disrespected the history of the steel plant and of the challenges faced by the workers who once operated the facility. The solution to that problem was easy: a museum. In 2009, a museum saw its grand opening at the Bethlehem Steel Plant. "The center piece for Bethlehem Works will be the National Museum of Industrial History, the first museum in the Smithsonian Institute's Affiliation Program." (Papa) This created a beautiful place to honor the hard work of those who inhabited this land before us. The museum includes a memorial for those who died while working in the plant. About 70 workers had died while working in the plant, and special efforts were made to honor their lives with a beautiful memorial (Assad).

The reconstruction project saw its pros and cons, and listened to the voices of the residents. Many opinions and strategies were listened to and implemented to ensure this change was a prosperous one. With the changes came the environmental and economic accomplishments, while still preserving the legacy of the steel plant. The drastic changes elicited positive and negative emotions, while overall seemed to provide progressive

action for Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.



Photo Credit: Shaun O'Boyle

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