

## 1990-2015

### Becoming A Destination

*“It went from a nothing town to a something town. It became a destination. It took a long time.”*

- *Donna Rego, former owner, Bellefonte Cafe*

As the 20th century drew to a close, Bellefonte marked its 85th birthday. And, like many 85-year-olds, the town was a bit tired. But the dawn of a new century would trigger a revitalization as a new generation of leaders strove to build community spirit while permitting other levels of government to take over responsibilities that the mostly unpaid volunteers who served on the town commission were no longer well equipped to handle.

While the revival would demonstrate residents’ general satisfaction with a niche of small-town living surrounded by an increasingly sprawling suburban environment, population numbers would reflect stability, and little more.

Census figures showed a small population drop – from 1,279 to 1,243 – between 1980 and 1990, a minimal increase, to 1,249, in 2000, and further slippage, to 1,193 in 2010.

While population totals would move within that narrow band, plus or minus 100 residents, spurts of new construction would provide fresh testimony of the town’s charm.

Kemer Lefler, who served on the town commission from 1982 to 2002, the last four years as its president, says Bellefonte was “a sleepy old town” in the early 1990s. But the next decade would see a transition as newer residents – and not just those who purchased the 25 new homes built in the town in the 1990s – began playing a more active role, both in government and in the town’s business district.

1990 would begin with the commission acting on issues that might best be described as “dull but important,” items like the passage of amended building and plumbing codes and approval of new regulations on drainage. For the most part, these matters stirred little controversy, and Lefler says it wasn’t unusual for the commissioners to have no more than two or three residents show up at their monthly meetings.

One significant issue did rouse residents in 1990. Besides having a well-developed reputation as a pleasant community, Bellefonte was becoming known as one of the most affordable areas for working-class residents of Wilmington’s northern suburbs.

With many of the town’s building regulations dating back more than 70 years, to an era when minimum lot sizes were significantly smaller than required by New Castle County’s newer building code, developers saw an opportunity, and so did first-time homebuyers who were seeking a little piece of heaven in a less pricey patch of Brandywine Hundred.

Developers and builders started to squeeze homes into every vacant lot in the town and current residents complained that the minimum permitted lot size, 4,000 square feet, was too small. In response, the commission voted in May to impose a moratorium on new construction, effective June 1, while it studied the issue. The discussion would continue for more than a year, with residents occasionally raising side issues, including building setback requirements, the handling of building and plumbing permits and restricting the hours that building contractors could work. One resident even suggested making the construction moratorium permanent.

As part of the review, Lefler checked properties throughout the town and reported in August that most of the homes in town were built on lots of 4,000 square feet or more. A month later he reported on 15 vacant lots, saying that three of them would be made useless if the minimum lot size was increased to 6,500 square feet, as some had suggested. Such a change would deprive landowners of their property rights, and Brian Bartley, the town attorney, said that the commission could not legally pass or amend ordinances that would impair property rights. As an alternative, he recommended wording any new ordinance to prohibit subdivision of larger lots if the result would be lots of less than 6,500 square feet. Finally, in September 1991, the commission passed an ordinance setting the minimum lot size at 6,500 square feet.

Bellefonte's penchant for stability and continuity were evident in the 1991 elections, when Ann Frampton was chosen to begin her 27th year on the town commission and her colleagues proceeded to elect her as their president for the 11th time. Lefler was also re-elected to a two-year term. However, in a hint of the changes that would come, Richard Perillo and Michael DeMauro were elected to their first terms.

"A lot of people have grown up here and they tend to remain because it's a nice place to live," Frampton told a reporter following her election. "There's a lot to be said for getting things done when you're dealing with people you know."

In the early 1990s, nuisance issues consumed much of the commission's time – items like illegally parked cars and whether the town could order the demolition of a resident's partially collapsed garage. The town's finances were stable, and funds were available to make some improvements at the town hall – replacing the windows and installing new sidewalks and aluminum siding. The budget for 1993-94 projected \$95,900 in income, with \$86,000 coming from property taxes and the rest from rentals and interest. As always, trash collection was the primary expense -- \$73,000.

1991 and 1992 did bring some unusual notoriety to the town when James Red Dog, who lived on Brandywine Boulevard for a year or so, was arrested, sentenced to death and executed for the slaying of a 30-year-old resident of nearby Marsh Road. Red Dog's case drew significant attention after it was learned that he had been placed in a federal witness protection program by prosecutors in Illinois as a reward for testifying in criminal cases there – even though he had previously been involved in four brutal slayings. The fact that the Red Dog episode might be labeled as Bellefonte's "crime of the century," even though the slaying occurred outside the town, serves as further evidence of the community's overall tranquil history.

The repaving of the boulevard early in 1992 prompted a resurgence of one of the town's periodic problems – lead-footed drivers who paid little heed to the posted 25 miles per hour speed limit. State Police responded appropriately, dispatching troopers equipped with radar guns to nab the offenders.

The community spirit so evident in the town's early days remained alive. In September of 1992, residents Judith Ward and Diane Klitz proposed organizing a town-wide yard sale. They returned a month later to report that the sale had been successful, and the commissioners voted to reimburse them \$22 to cover their cost of advertising the event.

By the mid-1990s a revitalization of the town's business district on Brandywine Boulevard had begun. Some operations had long been in place – like the laundromat and Howard L. Robertson's civil engineering firm – but turnover in many shops resulted in refreshing changes.

Playing a major role in the rebirth, Lefler says, was a woman who loved Bellefonte even though she was not a resident, Gertrude Dunlap. She lived in nearby Lindamere and worked for 35 years at the DuPont Company's Edge Moor plant, about a mile from the town, before retiring in 1978. She then served as the historian for the Fox Point Association, the regional civic organization for eastern Brandywine Hundred, and volunteered with numerous community nonprofit groups. In 1990, she published *Fox Point Remembered*, a book filled with reminiscences of longtime residents of the area, including several who lived in Bellefonte.

Dunlap helped create Boulevard Days, a street festival that blended sidewalk sales, food and entertainment, and helped raise money to pay for the town's streetscape project, which would include new lighting and paving along Brandywine Boulevard in the center of town. Dunlap's enthusiasm and her network of contacts helped renew interest in the town from state and county political leaders.

Perhaps the most significant development occurred in 1995, when Donna Rego purchased the five-bedroom home at 804 Brandywine Boulevard and began its gradual transformation. Within a year she had opened a resale business, the Bellefonte Trading Company, selling everything from dishes and kitchenware to artwork and antiques.

Her early success prompted others to give it a try, and soon resale shops blossomed on the boulevard. Joanna Geroski moved her kitschy Eclectica shop from Wilmington's trendy Trolley Square to a spot alongside Rego's business. Sue Ellen Creech, specializing in gently used women's clothing, gave her business such a catchy name – Sacks Thrift Avenue – that the upscale New York clothier threatened her with a lawsuit. (At the start, Sacks Thrift Avenue operated on the ground floor of the duplex with Eclectica in the converted garage in the rear, but they swapped locations after a few years.)

As other retailers – primarily resale shops specializing in clothing, furniture and home accessories – built their businesses on the boulevard, Rego transitioned her business, first adding a café to her resale operation, then making the café its dominant component, officially changing its name to the Bellefonte Café in 2002. The move made a great deal of sense as it gave daytime shoppers a place to stop to enjoy a meal and, during warmer weather, relax on the front porch. Another factor in the success of the

business, Rego says, was the frequent visiting by real estate agents as they gave prospective homebuyers a taste of the town's ambience.

The cafe would evolve into the Bellefonte's primary gathering place, an unofficial "town hall" where commissioners, business owners and residents could have a bite to eat while discussing the issues of the day. Over the years, Sunday brunches, occasional live music and, eventually, a liquor license would add to the café's appeal.

Securing the liquor license in 2005 was not without controversy. About 100 residents, including Ann Frampton, the former president of the town commission, protested the application to the state's Alcoholic Beverage Control Commission. They cited Bellefonte's history as a "dry town," pointedly noting that Peco's, the local liquor store, was just outside the town limits on Philadelphia Pike. They recalled the battle in 1957, when residents' objections persuaded the beverage commission to deny an application for a package store on Brandywine Boulevard. Tony Bruno, a former town commission president, spoke up in support of the café's application during a town meeting, saying the opposition consisted largely of "anti-business" crusaders who did not want anything in the town to change. The café's supporters would prevail, and Rego secured the liquor license, raising the café's profile – and popularity – even more.

Other retailers would come and go through these two decades.

On the edge of the boulevard's business district, on the southwest corner of Grove Avenue, Dominic Nardo sold the barber shop he had operated for some 40 years in 1989, and Richard Leach transformed the space into a reupholstery business that remained there for 18 years. When Leach moved out in 2007, the building became the home of the town's first law office, with Christopher Koyste setting up a boutique practice specializing in federal criminal defense and state civil cases, as well as preparing wills for local residents.

Storefronts underwent a major recycling between 2003 and 2006, starting with the move of a specialty bake shop, Sweets to You by Ginger, from its former location on Philadelphia Pike near Marsh Road into what had once been a grocery store on the boulevard. The following year, Michael's Barber Shop moved from near Marsh and Silverside roads into a small building on the northeast corner of the Boulevard and Marion Avenue. The two relocated businesses brought something Bellefonte's other retailers needed – a steady flow of regular customers.

Michael's and Sweets to You soon developed a unique partnership – customers waiting for a haircut or a shave could read a magazine and munch on Ginger's fresh-baked cookies. The bakery would remain a popular stop on the boulevard for more than a decade, but it closed about a year after its owner, Ginger Metaxotos, died in November 2014.

Across the boulevard from the barber shop, Sue Kallstrom upgraded a former resale business into an antiques shop, Finders Keepers, which she stocked by buying at auctions and visiting estate sales in New York and the New England states. Kallstrom stayed in town for seven years. In 2013, she sold the

storefront to Sue Walton, who rebranded the shop as Bellefonte Vintage and eventually expanded into the retail space next door.

On the west side of the boulevard, between Robertson's civil engineering office and the laundromat, two unique retailers found a home for several years: Orchids of Bellefonte, at the time the only retailer of specialty live plants in northern Delaware, and Dragon Queen's Lair, a gift shop specializing in Celtic and metaphysical items, as well as English, Scottish and Irish imports.

After those businesses had run their course, Valerie White, who had been hosting poetry readings in the café for several years, took over the space in 2011 and created Bellefonte Arts, which she described as an "arts clubhouse," a place where local artists could sell their works and novices could take lessons in painting, photography, jewelry making and other specialties.

White also took the lead in creating the Bellefonte Arts Festival, a street fair launched in May 2009 that expanded on Gertrude Dunlap's earlier Boulevard Days concept.

It didn't take long for the festival to grow to feature more than 50 vendors in addition to the local retailers, plus performances by area musicians and food and beverage sales.

In 2013, the festival spawned a project that provided a new conversation piece for the town, a playful animal mural painted on the back wall of the barber shop by Nicole Kristiana Logan, an artist who lives a few blocks away on Marion Avenue. "It's animals, highly patterned animals ... animals you can find in Bellefonte — a squirrel, a rabbit, a fox, a blue jay, a cardinal, a puppy and a kitten," Logan said in a News Journal article published as she completed painting. The mural includes some Delaware themes, peach blossoms, a holly tree and a swallowtail tiger butterfly. In the center is a sparkling fountain, which, despite the town's name, is something the century-old community still lacks.

Throughout this period, the Brandywine Hundred Fire Company continued to improve both its building and its apparatus. A \$1.7 million renovation in 1997-1998 featured a 26-foot addition running across the entire front of the building, creating larger engine bays and additional equipment space. The hall area was expanded and a new radio room was built as well. Office space for fire and rescue officers was incorporated into a new mezzanine area.

Other purchases by the fire company in the period included a new pumper in 2006, new ambulances in 2008 and 2009, a brush fire truck in 2009, and three refurbished ambulances in 2014 and 2015. The acquisitions gave the fire company an opportunity to demonstrate how the costs of its equipment had risen over the year. Its first pumper, purchased in 1924, cost \$4,500. The truck purchased in 2006 cost \$515,000.

As the business district underwent its revitalization, the town's leaders recognized the need for some governance changes as well.

In 2004, the commission passed an ordinance repealing four old laws that were deemed to be "antiquated" or "unused." Two of the repealed ordinances related to amendments in 1950 and 1961 to the town's fire code – measures no longer needed because these regulations are now handled by the

state fire marshal. Laws related to sewer connections and liens associated with sewer fees could be repealed because these matters had become the responsibility of New Castle County.

Two more significant changes occurred because commissioners recognized that certain responsibilities could be carried out more effectively by the county government. In 2005, the commission voted to recognize the New Castle County Police as the agency with primary law-enforcement responsibilities within the town. (Interestingly, not until 2011 did the county government get around to increasing the “county service fee,” the tax paid by Bellefonte property owners for county services, to include the cost of policing.)

Also in 2005, the commission adopted the county’s property maintenance code while simultaneously repealing town ordinances concerning abandoned vehicles, vacant properties, the care of premises and weed accumulations. Once the commission adopted the county code, the New Castle County Council, at the town’s request, passed an ordinance taking over responsibility for code enforcement in the town.

That change eliminated what had long been a burdensome duty for the volunteer commissioners – trying to resolve unneighborly disputes about unkempt properties – and placed these matters in the hands of professional inspectors employed by the county government.

As the town’s leaders engaged in serious business, residents – including at least one commissioner – found time for some frivolity, an escapade that resulted in the establishment of a new landmark on Brandywine Boulevard.

Kathy MacDonough, who served on the commission from 2003 to 2013, including terms as both secretary and president, in 2018 related much of the story of the Bellefonte Bathtub to The News Journal. Sometime around 2005, she recalled, she and a couple of others thought it would be fun to move a clawfoot tub onto the traffic island near the intersection of the boulevard and Bellefonte Avenue. The island, once believed to have been the site of a trolley turnaround, was the former home of a World War I memorial that had been moved to a nearby Veterans of Foreign Wars post and a “salute gun” that had been melted down as part of a World War II metal reclamation drive.

MacDonough and her collaborators somehow hauled the tub, which weighed between 200 and 400 pounds, from outside a nearby resale shop onto the traffic island. Residents soon filled the tub with soil and planted flowers inside, creating a unique conversation piece that has endured for at least 15 years. (The minutes of the town commission’s April 2014 meeting show that the town approved spending \$50 for new flowers for the bathtub.)

While making those long-overdue changes to the town’s ordinances, MacDonough and her fellow commissioners learned that they had not done something most other towns had done to comply with state law: write a comprehensive plan for the town. The process began in 2004 when the commissioners created the town’s first planning commission. The work accelerated in 2006 after the commissioners passed an ordinance giving the planning unit permanent status within town government. By the end of 2007, the commission completed the town’s first comprehensive plan, thanks in part to support from residents who volunteered their services, plus the town attorney, the Office of State Planning

Coordination and the New Castle County government, as well as five local businesses that donated refreshments for the commission's public workshops.

The plan contained a wealth of information about the town – both historic and contemporary – as well as a roadmap for Bellefonte's future. The effort included a survey mailed to 549 residences in the town. The survey received a 20 percent response rate – considered excellent for statistical purposes. Most survey questions drew favorable responses, with 98 percent indicating that the town's quality of life is good, and most residents saying they chose to live in Bellefonte because of its small-town atmosphere and neighborhood character. Top items that residents felt needed attention in the plan were neighborhood preservation, protecting historic buildings and sites, enhancing the central business district, traffic and parking, and natural resource protection.

Some of the more interesting information within the plan included:

- 466 of the town's 551 housing units in 2000 were single-family detached; there were 79 multi-family units and 6 single-family attached units.
- 81 percent of the homes were owner-occupied, significantly above the averages for New Castle County (66 percent) and the state (63 percent).
- The median year for housing construction in Bellefonte was 1943, compared with 1968 for the county and 1973 for the state.
- Median housing value in 2000 was \$113,300, below the medians for the county (\$132,900) and the state (\$122,000). The plan's authors attributed the differential to the age of the town's housing stock.
- The most prevalent housing styles in Bellefonte were Cape Cod (34.4 percent) and bungalow (21.3 percent).
- Median household income in 2000 was \$49,231 for Bellefonte, lower than in the county (\$52,419) but above the state median (\$47,381).

Recommendations within the plan covered key areas, including government, public safety, annexation, transportation, intergovernmental coordination, community character, housing, parks and recreation, environment, services for senior citizens and economic development.

Heading the list of governance recommendations were modernizing the town charter and town ordinances and providing stricter code enforcement. Studying annexation possibilities, revitalizing the town park, preserving the town's character and strengthening efforts to protect the town's natural resources also received great attention.

While charter revision was identified as a top priority in the Comprehensive Plan, with the plan's authors stating that "the review of the charter should eliminate outdated practices and language and add contents necessary for the operation of a modern-day municipality," it would take five years of off and on discussion before the commissioners formally tasked the members of the Planning Commission to undertake the rewrite of a document that, except for a boundary revision resulting from an annexation in 1923, had remained unchanged for nearly a century.

The Planning Commission spent two years working on the update before bringing it to the commissioners for approval in February 2014. Enabling legislation for the modernized charter was approved by the General Assembly in June and signed by Gov. Jack Markell on August 8. The revisions included replacing the description of the town's boundaries, updating election processes to conform to changes in state law, and removing references to elected law-enforcement officials such as "alderman" and "constable" whose positions no longer existed. The new charter was in alignment with recently revised charters in other Delaware municipalities. It also more carefully enumerated the duties and responsibilities of members of the town commission and other town officers, even including a "legislative schedule" that listed the months in which essential activities are required to take place. The new document gave the commissioners more discretion than before; for example, it authorized them to set "reasonable compensation" for the town secretary and treasurer and to authorize a "monthly stipend" for the president and other commissioners.

While the governor's signature enabled the commission to meet its goal of having the new charter enacted before the town celebrated its centennial in 2015, the process was not yet complete. In reviewing the document after it had been enacted, members of the governor's staff determined that a few more changes would be required during the General Assembly's 2015 session. One change eliminated a provision stating that commissioners would forfeit their office by not attending meetings. Also eliminated was language permitting commissioners to vote on whether another member had a conflict of interest. Two other changes made the charter consistent with state laws concerning oaths of office and future revisions of the charter.

After the charter revision had been completed, the commission turned its attention to another important legislative matter: the annexation process. One provision of the new charter gave the town the authority to annex properties – but it would first have to write an annexation ordinance.

In many communities, one objective of annexation is a desire to smooth out municipal boundaries. In developing the Comprehensive Plan, the town pointed to one such irregularity – four properties just outside the town limits and bordering the campus of the Mount Pleasant Elementary School and Edgemoor (now Bellevue) Community Center. For three of these properties, the only access required going through the town. Due to their location, all four had been receiving the benefit of some town services, most notably snow plowing during the winter months.

The commission addressed the annexation issue in November 2015, passing an ordinance establishing an annexation procedure, including a requirement for two public hearings to give individuals affected the opportunity to offer comments. In February 2016, the commission approved a resolution beginning the annexation process for the four properties. Following hearings in March and April, the commission approved the annexation at its April meeting, setting an effective date of June 1, 2016. The annexation achieved the desired purpose of smoothing out the town's boundaries and ended any confusion concerning nonresidents benefiting from town services.

As Bellefonte approached its centennial, the commission took on another key objective from the comprehensive plan: revitalization of the town park. The park, adjacent to the Town Hall, had been

neglected for years, and many residents believed it was nothing more than a play area for the children attending the daycare center housed in the Town Hall annex.

Work on the park plan had begun as the comprehensive plan was being written. First, the town sought the help of the New Castle County government, which declined to fund the project or do any development work but did offer to assist in the park's design. Then, in 2006, Commissioner Scott MacKenzie wrote a request for a \$50,000 grant from the state's Land and Water Conservation Trust Fund. In October of that year, the fund offered the town a \$30,000 grant, enough to get the project started but, in all likelihood, not nearly enough to give the community everything it desired.

By the fall of 2007, the park's design was well underway. Features included fencing, shrubbery and other plantings, with a centerpiece that provided a visual reminder of the town's history: a gazebo in the shape of a trolley car.

Through 2008, MacKenzie continued his efforts to secure additional funding while construction got underway. By November 2008, the landscaping and fencing, the gazebo and its surrounding brick paving had been completed, and the state grant had been increased to \$54,000. With the additional grant money and some town funds, several benches, a pair of picnic tables and a play area for children were included. The park was dedicated in June 2009.

Completion of the park project was just one of several initiatives that demonstrated the town's commitment to environmental issues.

Bellefonte was among the first municipalities in Delaware to establish a town-wide collection of recyclables. In recognition of this achievement, the Delaware Solid Waste Authority presented the town with a bench, made entirely of recycled materials, with the inscription "Make Every Day Earth Day." The bench now rests in the southeast corner of the park, close to the Town Hall.

Also, from 2010 to 2012, the town participated in a pair of state-run energy-efficiency initiatives. One provided a grant for the installation of solar panels on the roof of the Town Hall; the other offered residents a total of \$240,000 in rebates for installing selected energy-saving improvements on their homes.

The town's successes in the early years of the 21st century can be attributed, at least in part, to the work of a new core of leaders on the commission, the successors to the legacy of earlier leaders like Ann Frampton, Dorothy Marx and Kemer Lefler.

Kathy MacDonough, in an article in the town newsletter reporting on her reappointment to the commission in 2009, took the opportunity to salute several of her colleagues. "With the enormous help of tremendous volunteers like Scott MacKenzie, Terry Thompson and Elaine Chester, great strides have been made in management of town resources and town facilities, and also in updating town codes and ordinances, many of which were unchanged since the '40s and '50s. Bellefonte's charge is to continue to respond to dramatic changes in election laws, waste management, the environment and the economy,

as well as to grapple with the ongoing responsibilities of planning, zoning and code enforcement,” she said.

In this period, the town also continued work on transferring certain oversight responsibilities to the New Castle County government. Discussions about shifting enforcement of the building code began in late 2011 and did not conclude until late 2016. The town did retain its authority over zoning matters.

A significant project caused a stir among residents in 2012 and 2013 even though it did comply with the town’s zoning ordinance. A three-story apartment building was proposed for construction at 906 Brandywine Boulevard. Plans called for covered parking on the first level and a total of 14 rental units (13 one-bedroom and one efficiency), making it the largest rental property in the town. The site was zoned for mixed use development, which would include apartments. Several residents who attended the commission’s June 2012 meeting did express concerns, according to the minutes, that “the structure is not taking the spirit of the town into consideration in its design.” The project was completed in 2014.

One of Bellefonte’s perennial traffic concerns – safety at the intersection of the town’s two main streets, Brandywine Boulevard and Marion Avenue – took a new turn in early 2013, when the state Department of Transportation concluded a study by determining that the traffic signal at the intersection did not meet new federal standards. According to DelDOT, replacing the signal would cost about \$100,000 but traffic volume at the intersection did not justify the cost. The matter sparked some debate among residents. While some lamented the loss of the town’s only traffic light, others noted that it would put an end to motorists accelerating to get through the intersection before the light turned red. Ultimately, the issue was resolved by removing the traffic signal and installing four-way stop signs.

In 2015, the town celebrated its centennial on March 9 with a reception at the Brandywine Hundred Fire Company before the regularly scheduled town meeting.

The reception, which attracted about 125 residents, elected officials and friends of Bellefonte, included a tribute to families with a long history of residence in Bellefonte and support of the fire company, including the Hurst, McGinnes, McKay, Raign, Frampton, Marx and Schmidt families.

Proclamations and letters of congratulations were delivered from Vice President Joe Biden, Senators Tom Carper and Chris Coons, Representative John Carney, the Delaware Senate and House, New Castle County Executive Tom Gordon and the New Castle County Council. Speakers at the reception included state Senator Harris McDowell III, state Representative Debra Heffernan, New Castle County Council President Christopher Bullock and Councilman John Cartier and representatives of the county executive and Senator Coons.

The congratulatory messages acknowledged not only the town’s history but also the dedication of its residents.

“Bellefonte has distinguished itself by self-governance and a strong commitment to working together. Those are the values that have allowed your town to grow and thrive over these many years,” Congressman Carney wrote in his letter.

In a speech recorded in the Senate Record on Bellefonte's centennial day, Senator Coons said: "The community has withstood the test of time through the dedication of its citizens...."

"Today Bellefonte lives on and flourishes with quaint vintage shops, comfortable cafes and a farmers' market that comes to life with an abundance of fresh produce every summer.

"A historic town, a town rich with diverse ideas, Bellefonte has been critical to the fabric of Delaware, and remains an iconic landmark in New Castle County.

"Although it has grown tremendously over the past one hundred years, Bellefonte maintains its small town feel and community principles, and will continue to instill those values in Delawareans of tomorrow."