

32nd
year
of service to the
Mon Valley

MVI HIGHLIGHTS

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Clairton

Mixed-use development is a \$16.7M investment in city's future

Message from the CEO

Thank you for your support during a challenging time

Mon Valley Initiative was born out of crisis, so we're used to being resilient, but 2020 has tested everyone at levels few of us could have imagined.



I am grateful to our staff, who so quickly adapted to collaborating remotely and providing services over the Internet, as well as to our board members, who became fast experts in the use of Zoom and other technologies. Their flexibility and determination to keep working enabled MVI to continue providing vital, personalized support at a time when it has been especially needed.

I'm also grateful for our funders and donors, who worked with us as timelines and goals shifted during the course of 2020. That was especially helpful when the COVID-19 lockdown forced us to delay activity on a number of construction projects.

And I'm grateful to the communities where we work and to the participants who access our services for telling us what they needed. I'm glad that over three decades, we've developed trusting relationships that allow us to help shoulder each other's burdens.

I'm also encouraged by a renewed willingness to engage in the difficult conversations we've been having about racism in our country—and in the Mon Valley in particular. Our board and staff are explicit in our support of the Black Lives Matter movement. We are actively exploring ways that MVI can work proactively to address racism in ourselves and in our institutions during the months and years ahead.

Thank you so much for your support, encouragement and advice this year. Here's to a better 2021.

Laura R. Zinski
Chief Executive Officer



The 70,000-square-foot Clairton Inn Project will provide 49 units of quality, affordable housing and several street-level commercial spaces along Miller Avenue in the heart of the city's business district. Target completion date is 2022.

State, county and local officials broke ground Oct. 9 on what Clairton Mayor Richard Lattanzi said is probably the largest new development in his city in 50 years.

The \$16.7 million, 70,000-square-foot Clairton Inn Project will provide 49 units of quality, affordable housing and several street-level commercial or retail spaces along Miller Avenue in what was the heart of the city's business district through most of the 20th century.

The development also will renovate and preserve the historic Clairton Inn building, a former hotel erected in the early 20th century, and remove several blighted buildings. "A whole lot of people were involved with this," Lattanzi said. "So you can imagine how excited I am today."

Mon Valley Initiative is the developer of the project, which is designed by LGA Partners. Mistick Construction is the general contractor and is working to hire Clairton residents as laborers. "I remember a few years ago, when we cut the ribbon for the produce market up the street," said state Rep. Austin Davis, who was part of the team that negotiated a deal to use tax credit

financing to help pay for the project. "We said, 'Clairton's best days are still ahead of it.' Today is the confirmation that it's absolutely true."

The tax credits were authorized by the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Authority, with additional financial support from the state Department of Community & Economic Development's Keystone Communities program, Allegheny County Economic Development, the City of Clairton, MVI and Economic Development South.

Finding the funds for the project "was hard work," said Laura R. Zinski, MVI chief executive officer. "I want to thank everyone who participated in the planning process over the past couple of years. The community crafted the vision for us, and we were able to carry through with it, thanks to the mayor, council and Economic Development South, as well as with the help of Rep. Davis and DCED Secretary Dennis Davin at the Harrisburg level."

Construction is expected to begin once several existing vacant buildings are demolished, with scheduled completion in early 2022.

It's been quite a year! How are MVI folks coping?

Mon Valley Initiative was extremely fortunate to have platforms in place that made remote collaboration possible during the COVID-19 pandemic. Still, "going remote" was challenging, especially for our workforce coaches and housing counselor, who are used to delivering face-to-face services to our program participants. We asked some of our co-workers: How have you been coping with working remotely and serving clients virtually?

T. Charles Howell IV

Director, Workforce Development & Financial Coaching

The people we serve have traditionally needed in-person services, so transitioning to virtual and remote work really changed how we had to talk to our participants. It forced us to be more holistic. In the past, if we had an orientation, for instance, we had people in the office, and if someone needed banking help, we would say, that person is right there, if you need help with food, that person is right there. Because we're doing things remotely, we now have to do those things for our participants.

It's been very time-intensive, but I'm also surprised at how powerful it's been. By doing so much one-on-one work with people, we're forced to focus on each individual more, and it's been more fruitful. The number of people we've been able to place has been higher, percentage-wise, than usual, because we're much more connected to them.

Some of the skills we've learned over this time will definitely transcend the COVID-19 pandemic. Our job is building relationships between participants, employers and other resources in our network. We've



done a lot of work around being able to listen to people and better discern what their needs are. Our whole staff has really risen to the challenge. They've all made this transition really smooth. At the beginning, we all had questions about how we could continue to deliver services, but they've gone the extra mile. Everyone put in the work.

I'm relatively new to MVI. I've worked for a lot of different companies and non-profits, and I'm as much of a cynic as anyone else, but it's been so pleasantly surprising to me to work for an organization that actually cares about people, and does what it says it's going to do, rather than just talking about it.

Sarah Altomari

Program Operations Coordinator

I'm thankful that I get to work with my dogs every day! But working at home has been a challenge—especially not having access to the resources in the office. I'm surprised at how well we've been able to sustain people working from home for such a long period of time.



And I'm thankful that we've all been able to keep working. I'd like to really thank April Hoover, our chief financial officer. There were a lot of things that April and I were doing together, but now we can't, and it's fallen back on her head because we're not in the same office. Kudos to her for taking on so many extra tasks.

Grant Cole

Community Outreach Specialist

Doing community outreach during the COVID-19 pandemic has been incredibly hard, because you can't do it in any of the traditional ways. The learning curve has been rough and it's been an odd adjustment. Obviously, the annual dinner was a whole different world this year, and I want to give a shout-out to Jason Togyer, our communications manager, for helping make it possible.

Frankly, I was impressed at how easily our different community groups transitioned to meeting remotely—really smoothly in most cases. It's almost been easier to get people involved who weren't previously coming to these meetings—the attendance has doubled for some of them. That was a surprise to me, and an unexpected benefit. It's corny, but as hard as this year has been, I've been encouraged and inspired to see so many people get more involved and come together to help one another in a time of need. It's been very impressive to see organizations adapt and change so that they could continue their missions.



Shannon Lawhorn

Senior Employment & Financial Coach

Working from home has been a challenge sometimes. One thing I've noticed is that I tend to work longer hours. I don't take breaks and I don't take a lunch when I'm at home. Otherwise, I've been surprised at how adaptable we were. We were able to effectively and efficiently serve our clients. What do they say, "Necessity is the mother of invention"?

In fact, thanks to all of these different remote applications, such as Zoom, we were able to have more people attend our events and Job Clubs online than in person. Some people are more apt to use technology rather than meeting in person—especially millennials, because they're so tech-savvy. I think we've been able to tap into something they were already using, and in some ways, it increased our productivity.

During our recent "Tackle Your Financial Goals" event, we had 14 participants.



Jonathan Weaver, our housing counselor, gave a presentation on homebuying, saving money and improving your credit.

Afterwards, one of the participants told me she was impressed with the entire event, but that Jonathan's information impressed her the most. She's already a homeowner, but she was interested in learning more about using home equity. I realized that we are a tremendous asset to the community at large.

I want to thank Debbie Mattie, employment and financial coach, for her help this year. She has always been willing and ready to serve. She is incredible. She's accessible at any time you need her, and she's one of the most helpful persons I've ever met. I'm also thankful to Laura for her leadership, and for how she was able to navigate through this tumultuous time of COVID-19, and maintain our funding, so that we could keep working while remaining healthy.

Dave Yargeau

Real Estate Developer

Coordinating construction projects this year was tough. With everyone working remotely, it's been challenging just to get paperwork done—when everyone's only in their office one day a week, everything takes longer than normal.



I'm surprised how quickly MVI and the other agencies we work with were able to respond to all of the changes. If you had told me a year ago everyone would be working remotely and we wouldn't be able to have face-to-face meetings, I would have thought it would have taken several months to switch. But everyone put in a lot of work to make the transition to this new reality a relatively smooth one.

I'm thankful for how understanding and flexible people have been. Everyone has had a "we're all in this together" kind of attitude. We all know that collaborating is going to take a little bit longer than we're used to, but everyone's been communicative. If someone's not available one day, someone else is able to step up and fill in.

If there's anyone who really deserves a shout-out, it's John Bachetti. At the beginning of the quarantine and the lockdown, it was difficult to keep up with our real estate projects. With Rick Dunn's retirement, there also was a vacancy that happened at the same time we were taking over our property maintenance. John has really been helping out, and that includes doing actual maintenance work himself fairly often. Everyone in the real estate department would say he's been invaluable for us at this point.

Clark Webb

Real Estate Portfolio Manager



I'm thankful we have so many knowledgeable teammates and people working at MVI, because it was a difficult year, but whenever we ran into problems, we could reach out to someone else for help or information. I'm looking forward to getting back to normal as time goes on—it will be great to meet people in person and not have so many barriers.

The biggest challenge, for me, was trying to keep things moving during the lockdown—we didn't have new tenants moving in and people weren't able to pay rent, yet we still had to fix things and buy things. We had to find a lot of workarounds, but we made it work, even with limited time, funds and manpower.

A lot of credit goes to senior construction manager John Bachetti. He picked up all sorts of slack after Rick Dunn retired and a maintenance person left. We also were able to work closely with MVI's Workforce Development team, which quickly shifted gears to help tenants apply for unemployment and rental assistance.

MVI in the news



Kate Giammarise of WESA-FM, left, and Joyce Gannon of the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, right, interview Andrew Ritchie, MVI real estate developer, about the Clairton Inn.

HUD awards supplemental grant to support housing counseling

MVI has been awarded nearly \$184,000 to provide foreclosure avoidance and rental counseling services to families whose incomes have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I encourage families and individuals who need help in making important housing decisions to contact Mon Valley Initiative," said Joe DeFelice, HUD regional administrator for the Mid-Atlantic states. "Housing counseling can be the difference between a Mon Valley family keeping their home or losing it due to the financial impacts of COVID-19."

HUD-approved housing counseling agencies assist homebuyers in evaluating their readiness for a home purchase and help them navigate the homebuying process. Agencies also help households find affordable rental housing, offer financial literacy training and provide foreclosure prevention counseling.

"Congratulations to the MVI team," said Michael Horvath, HUD Pittsburgh field office director. "Thank you for all you are doing to help struggling households during this difficult time in our nation." (*HUD News, Oct. 26, 2020*)

New homes rise at old Braddock Hospital site

Six new single-family homes are under construction in Braddock, part of a years-long effort to redevelop the site of the former UPMC Braddock Hospital. The two-story homes, in what was formerly vacant land that had been hospital parking, are being developed by MVI and will be sold to income-qualified home buyers. Funding for the housing came from federal Community Development Block Grant funds, Allegheny County and other public and private sources.



MVI and borough officials convened several community meetings in the wake of the hospital's closing, and new housing was one of the needs described by the community, along with park space and a health clinic. In addition to the housing under construction, the hospital site is now home to apartments, Braddock Civic Plaza, an AHN health clinic and office spaces as well. (*Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Aug. 18, 2020*)



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Our mission

Mon Valley Initiative strengthens the Mon Valley region by responsibly investing in our people and places. We are carrying out our mission by:

Working together with local residents and stakeholders

Providing career and financial coaching to individuals

Developing residential and commercial properties

Delivering technical assistance services to our partners

Local advisory groups

Braddock Economic Development Corp.
Downtown West Newton, Inc.
East Pittsburgh Economic Development Corp.
Monessen Community Development Corp.
North Braddock Cares, Inc.
Pitcairn Community Renaissance, Inc.
Swissvale Economic Development Corp.
Turtle Creek Development Corp.

A service of MVI:

Southwestern Pennsylvania Re-Entry Coalition

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Or make a monthly pledge to MVI via **Patreon**: www.patreon.com/monvalleyinitiative.

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