



**The Brookings Institution**

**Reimagine Rural podcast**

**“Transforming coal country in Shamokin, Pennsylvania”**

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*Guests in Shamokin, Pennsylvania:*

JIM BACKES, chair, Anthracite Outdoor Adventure Area Authority (AOAA)

JOHN BROWN, former mayor (2019–22)

BETSEY KRAMER, revitalization coordinator, SEDA-COG

DAVE PORZI, director of operations, AOAA

ANDY TWIGGAR, investor

RICK ULRICH, mayor (2022–present)

KATHY VETOVICH, business owner

KIM WHEELER, executive director, SEDA-COG

*Host:*

TONY PIPA

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*Episode Summary:*

Shamokin, Pennsylvania is a former coal town on its way to becoming an outdoor recreation destination after decades of decline. In this episode of Reimagine Rural, Tony Pipa returns to his roots to learn how an abandoned mine remediation project is helping spur community renewal. He speaks with local leaders and residents who are bringing their vision to life with the support of key public resources.

[ATV engine sounds; music]

**BACKES:** One of the things is I think for an area to revitalize itself, it has to find its strength. You know, we don't have the ocean right next to us, so, we're obviously we can't be a beach town. The 6,500 acres doesn't lend itself to big industry, and it's a little bit too far from highways and infrastructure that you would need. So, what could you do with it? And recreational tourism is big, and recreational tourism is a thing that can revitalize a lot of communities. And when we look at this, that's what it's doing for ours.

**PIPA:** That's Jim Backes describing the idea behind the Anthracite Outdoor Adventure Area, a park that now extends over 8,000 acres outside of Shamokin, Pennsylvania, offering motorized vehicles like ATVs and motorcycles the chance to roam off-road through wild, beautiful land that was once mined but has been reclaimed and revitalized. We'll hear more about that and how it's helping revitalize the town of Shamokin itself.

I'm Tony Pipa, a senior fellow in the Center for Sustainable Development at the Brookings Institution. Welcome to the first episode of *Reimagine Rural*, a podcast that will visit different places across rural America that are making progress on their efforts to thrive and prosper amid economic and social change.

While the dominant narrative of rural America is one of decline, each episode will feature local people telling the story of their community and how they are enacting positive change. The towns are each at a different stage of their renewal, and because rural America is so diverse, you'll get to experience a wide range of people and places.

As together we learn about the positive momentum they've created, it will give us the chance to explore how policy decisions affect these towns, and to think about how federal policy can be more effective in meeting the needs and opportunities of these places.

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For this first episode, I went home, back to the heart of central Pennsylvania. I grew up just seven miles from Shamokin, in the town of Elysburg, a quiet town of around 2,000 people. Elysburg is very different in its history and trajectory than Shamokin, proving that axiom of rural experts: if you've seen one rural town, you've seen one rural town. But my own personal experience includes Shamokin. It's where I went to elementary school, it's where my dad had his offices, it's where my older siblings were captains on the high school sports teams.

The town was built on the anthracite coal industry. You could say that the land where the Adventure Area is now gave birth to the town. But anthracite coal went out of style in the 1960s, and the town has been on slow, steady decline since, one that's worsened over the past two decades.

What you'll hear today is two stories of revitalization: First, of the land left behind—scarred, misused, in a state of disrepair after being mined; and second, of a town left behind—economically and socially struggling once the industries powered by that mining left.

Let's go back to Jim Backes, a founding member of the governing authority for the Anthracite Outdoor Adventure Area, who is telling us about the land:

**BACKES:** So, when you think back about 12, 15 years ago, we had a couple of guys, one of our board members, Barry Yorwarth, and his friend Jeff Nye. They came up with the idea of, you know, we had a lot of people using what we called “the mountain” for recreational activities, Jeep, ATV riding, motorcycle riding. And we knew it was a perfect spot for that. So, he came up with the idea of, you know, could we make a park like they’ve done elsewhere in the country? And there was a big one called Paragon up in the Hazelton area that had recently closed because of a land dispute. And it really provided an opportunity. So, they started with the idea, start talking it the county commissioners. And after many years of working with them we were able to secure a grant, and the grant was from DCNR, so Department of Conservation and Natural Resources of Pennsylvania.

They, awarded us a state grant to do a study. So, it was about a two and I think was around a \$250,000 grant to study the feasibility. So, we called that the master plan.

**PIPA:** That \$250,000 plan led to a \$2.5 million grant and some smaller grants to put the ATV park together. This was all from local volunteers building relationships with county and state officials.

It wasn’t just an economic development initiative. It was also a safety issue—people were using the land for all sorts of purposes, having parties, jumping off of rock escarpments into a pool of water in a strip mine, riding their motorbikes, and sometimes getting hurt.

And it was also a conservation issue, as many people were using the land as a trash dump. People were dumping loads and loads of trash of all kinds, from tires to construction waste and everyday household trash.

And now that it’s all cleaned up? Well, I’ll let Jim Backes explain:

**BACKES:** And we have a premier facility here. On the East Coast our facility is is top rated. We have all the things people are looking for. So, we have elevation. So, a lot of people like to go up and down hills. We have that. We have wooded trails. We have open vistas, we have coal, we have sand, and we have mud. And and there’s people, you know, there’s people that show up with their ATV and they come with waders on and their day is going to play in the mud. There’s also we have Jeep clubs that come. We have a lot of Jeeps. We have a national event called Jeep Jamboree that’s here usually twice the summer and they sell out. They only take so many vehicles and it’s like a four-day event. So they’re in here, they’re working with local catering places. The local fire company has a fundraiser makes them lunch that they have out on the trail for two days. They have a banquet at one of the local facilities. Plus, they all stay in the area and they fill all the hotels around.

But again, they’re driving 30 miles. We want to we want them to drive two miles into the city of Shamokin and have these hotels filled up.

And that first year we sold 6,000 passes and probably had about 10,000 visits. This year we’re going to have 40,000 passes and I think that’s going to represent about 70,000 visits.

**PIPA:** The land that he’s talking about, those 8,000 acres, borders the city of Shamokin. It’s a town proud of its heritage as a center of the anthracite coal industry. Its history even includes

being the second town in America to be illuminated by a three-wire electric light station developed by Thomas Edison.

In addition to anthracite coal, Shamokin also had a thriving textile industry. So you could say that in the early 20th century, Shamokin helped power and clothe the country.

Over the past several decades, however, things took a turn for the worse. Anthracite coal, which is a hard and flinty coal, lost out to cheaper types of coal in the early 1960s. That began a slow decline then that has really accelerated over the last 20 years.

Here is how John Brown, who was mayor from 2018 through the end of 2021, describes it.

**BROWN:** Shamokin was in hard times. It really was. For a long time Shamokin was a giant hub here back in the '40s and '50s, and people were ... it was a bustling place. As I came in as mayor, Shamokin was really down on itself. We had just gone into Act 47. The previous administration had voted us into Act 47, a distressed city. Financially, the city was in trouble.

**PIPA:** Let's pause there. Act 47 is a special designation in the state of Pennsylvania for municipalities experiencing severe financial difficulties. The state takes on an oversight role and the town has to put together a plan to restructure its finances to become stable. The idea is to stave off bankruptcy. As former Mayor Brown says, financially, the city was in trouble.

But it wasn't just the financial situation of the town that was troubled. It was also the town's psychology, its very identity.

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**BROWN:** Shamokin is down on itself right now because we've had 20 years or better of "Shamokin was great." It's not anymore. People have left here. Nobody wants to be here. Get your kids to graduate and get the hell out of Shamokin. You know, that's all you heard. Problems, problems, problems. Everybody pointed them out. Every town in this country has the same problems that Shamokin had. No one champions Shamokin.

**PIPA:** Now, this may seem like a harsh assessment. But the data tells the same story of decline. Five decades ago, about the time that I started elementary school, the town's population was almost 12,000 people. In the last census in 2020, the population was just under 7,000 people, with almost a third of its residents living in poverty.

But at the same time, even in the midst of decline and what Mayor Brown and others described to me as a pervading sense of hopelessness, there was also, well, beauty—and people who cared enough to tend to it.

**BROWN:** So, we took office—and I say we because my wife was very involved with with everything that I did—we took office and the first thing that a new mayor does is look to solve all the problems of town. We drove around countless nights, her alongside of me with a clipboard. I'd be talking about vacant properties, dilapidated properties, things that the Codes Office should be doing. Assignments for the police department.

My wife, on the other hand, drove around looking at people's houses and saying, My God, look at that. Well, I drive around the block and sit and look and say, Which one? She'd say this one. This is beautiful. Look at this house. Look what they've done with their porch.

After a couple of nights of this, she got me looking at the good things in Shamokin. We decided then that rather than go to a council meeting and point out all the problems that we're working on, we're going to start taking portions of time and saying, Look at Shamokin. Look at how great this is. There are far more beautiful properties than there are rundown properties. But we only ever talked about the rundown properties. That's all people thought that was here.

So, my wife started a campaign with, we'd go out and buy a truckload of flowers, just a small potted flower. She would write a little poem and attach it to it from the Mayor and Mrs. Brown. The nice houses, we'd stop and take the time, just leave a potted plant. That was all. Didn't knock on the door, nothing. People would come home, find a potted plant, read the little message. And the response that we got was amazing. Other people started to believe that Shamokin was something.

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Groups of people—how do we get involved? Can we help you? The school, kids. The volume of interest that changed in making a positive attitude was absolutely amazing.

**PIPA:** That sense of love and pride for their community also motivated some people to invest. Meet Kathy Vetovich, one of those early investors. My mom was Kathy's softball coach when she was young, and they played on a team together when she got older. Kathy ultimately became president of a new Shamokin business association. We'll talk more about that later.

**VETOVICH:** My name is Kathy Vetovich, and what I do in Shamokin is it's really multifaceted. I started out by just being a citizen, and then I decided to become an investor. And right at the time where I was saying I need to invest in my hometown, it was really dead. Five, seven years ago, Shamokin was really a dead city. We had lost our textiles, we had lost our coal, we had lost our hope, truly. And as you rode downtown, there were no cars. There were no, very few open businesses.

But I've lived in Shamokin and worked in Shamokin all of my life. I'm a fourth generation Shamokin person. There's a mural on the side of one of my buildings that is my grandfather and my husband's grandfather. So, we're both from here.

I lived in Kansas City for a year-and-a-half and came home because, remember the show "Cheers"? You want to go where everybody knows your name. That's what I wanted. I realized quickly that I didn't want to be just a little cog in the wheel of Kansas City. I wanted to come home where a lot of people knew my name and I knew them. And I've been here ever since. I was 21 when I came home. You know, a couple of years ago, I had a couple of business deals that gave me that opportunity financially to invest in my hometown.

**PIPA:** Just like former mayor John Brown, Kathy sees a strong link between beauty and opportunity.

**VETOVICH:** As I was going through the process of investing, I bought a building. And that building, all I wanted to do is make it beautiful. And I did that. And then I was making that building beautiful—again, that’s part of a revitalization, just taking a building and being that spark in the community. So, I took that building and I saw this other building down the road and I said, Lord, I can make that building pretty too. And lo and behold, it came off of the tax sale and I was able to purchase it literally the next week. So, I made that building pretty. And that building turned into a restaurant. While I was opening that restaurant, there were actually three more buildings that I purchased at the time. I am still married, but those three buildings were all made beautiful as well.

So, that’s my investment into the community, really being that spark, that spark plug, and opening places like the place we’re in right now is Bamse Coffee Shop, a dog-friendly coffee shop, that actually is in a church that was really ready for the wrecking ball. I mean, it was so close to being torn down because of structural issues. And we stepped in and said, we’ll take that on. You know, potentially a million dollars in structural issues and my husband and I are like, yeah, we’ll take that. And we opened a coffee shop, and there are no structural issues, by the way. So, yea! But the coffee shop is just another opportunity and a destination for folks to come into Shamokin.

**PIPA:** As someone who grew up here, Kathy knows how proud her fellow residents are of their history. She also sees a strong link between the community’s history and its future.

**VETOVICH:** I think that for any community to really maintain that community ethos, they have to understand their heritage and they have to understand their future. So, you can’t have one without the other. You can’t have a future without your past.

So, what we’ve done in all of our businesses is we’ve really integrated that heritage—the restaurant’s name is Heritage—we’ve integrated that heritage. And throughout that business, that restaurant, we’ve incorporated different facets of the community’s past. So, we have old chandeliers from a theater, and we have different stock certificates from from different companies. And the list goes on.

So, understanding that really allows people to embrace that, to know where they’re coming from. But again, you can’t just live in that. You really have to look to the future as well. And that’s what I’ve tried to do at Heritage, in the restaurant. The building that we’re sitting in right now was an old church that didn’t make it. And we put a museum in the church. So, it’s a dog-friendly coffee shop in one section and the the social hall of the church is now a museum to our history.

And it’s funny because I decided to do this because I had an overlap of artifacts from the Heritage Restaurant. So, I started just putting things in place here.

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And all of a sudden everybody started donating. “Oh, this was in my mother’s closet.” And they wanted their artifacts to be part of this presentation. I don’t want it sitting in grandma’s closet. I want you to have it and you to present it. And that’s what I’ve tried to do that to really honor that as well.

**PIPA:** In 1979, the church that now houses the coffee shop drew visitors from miles around, because people felt like they could see the image of Christ's face on the tabernacle cloth. People waited in lines that stretched blocks to get a glimpse. An article about that now occupies a central place in the community museum that Kathy has installed in the church's old social hall.

That sense of history and community identity is what also drew another investor, Andy Twigg. Andy grew up in Shamokin and went to college, eventually settling in Bethlehem, PA, a former industrial city that is much larger but not dissimilar in feel to Shamokin. It's a city that has experienced its own comeback from its days as a steel town.

In fact, our interviews were conducted in a re-creation of the town's old radio station, WISL, which Kathy has installed in her museum at the Bamse Coffee Shop. The radio station has special meaning to Andy.

**TWIGGAR:** I grew up in in the Shamokin area. I left for college and moved to a city about an hour and a half outside of here, which was going under its own economic repositioning. It was Bethlehem, the city of Bethlehem in Pennsylvania. And they had Bethlehem Steel, which was closing down final operations in 1996, I believe. But it very much image or mirrored what was going on in in Shamokin and with coal really declining as a major economic force behind things.

So, in one degree, I felt very comfortable in this in a hard-knock, blue collar town of Bethlehem, because it was like the hard knock, blue collar town of Shamokin that I came from. You know, people were very real. And I always kept my tabs on the city, and I've always wanted to do a project in the city of Shamokin.

I have a connection to a lot of the radio equipment that surrounds us. WISL was an AM radio channel in the city of Shamokin that lived through the high the high time of of the city's history. The ISL stands for Isabel Shroyer Lark. Isabel Shroyer Lark is my great aunt. Her husband, Henry Lark was an industrialist, formed a lot of companies. His father was even more of an industrialist, set Henry up with this business as well as several others, including a garment mill. And that Lark name is what I'm kind of is one-half of what I'm honoring in the Lark-Burger Ventures, Burger being my my mother's mother, my grandmother on my mother's side. How the hell do you say that?

**PIPA:** Maternal grandmother.

**TWIGGAR:** That's it. That's what I was looking for. So, Lark is one half of the name of my company, which I'm it's kind of a tip of the hat to the other half—Burger is my maternal grandmother's maiden name.

**PIPA:** Kathy and Andy began to invest and buy properties as the Anthracite Outdoor Adventure Area, the ATV park, started becoming popular. It was drawing people to the area from all over the Northeast, even the country. But even as people were riding in the AOAA on trails that bordered Shamokin, the town wasn't really benefiting.

**VETOVICH:** And the AOAA is just growing astronomically. Every year we see folks from not only Pennsylvania, but Delaware, Montana, New Jersey. So, we have this influx of people. And up until about a year ago, they didn't know we were here. We're three miles from the gate for the AOAA and they didn't know that Shamokin existed

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because there were no hotels here. There were no places to stay. So, they would stay half an hour away. And then those places, those cities that had the hotels, were getting all of the economic boom.

**PIPA:** Remember, Shamokin was in severe economic distress. There were many empty buildings dotting the streets, abandoned, falling apart. Andy bought one of his buildings, the former F&S Brewery, for just \$500, it was in such bad shape. The elementary school that I attended doesn't even exist anymore—it was razed to the ground in 2017. The town needed help. Enter the SEDA-Council of Governments. Here's Kim Wheeler, their executive director.

**WHEELER:** SEDA-Council of Governments was developed in the late 1950s as a local development organization under the auspices of the Appalachian Regional Commission. So, we are one of seven organizations like ourselves in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania that serve the Appalachian region, which is 52 of the 67 counties in Pennsylvania. We cover 11 counties in central Pennsylvania, just north of the capital city of Harrisburg.

Shamokin is clearly in our footprint and we are always committed to serving our not only our urban centers, but our rural communities as well. And Shamokin fits squarely in that in terms of how we may be able to provide service. In a way that's unique, we thought would because of what we saw brewing in terms of the outdoor recreation park, the Anthracite Outdoor Recreation Park, and the combination of economic development and tourism opportunities that were being brought to lower Northumberland County, along with some initial inklings of investments that were starting to take hold or interest starting to play out in the city of Shamokin.

**PIPA:** An organization like SEDA-COG, which covers 11 counties, does not usually have the ability to provide dedicated assistance to just one community. But Shamokin, because of its Act 47 status, was in bad straits. A state legislator from the area, Kurt Masser, asked Kim if SEDA-COG could provide a person if the state could find the money. Kim Wheeler describes what happened next.

**WHEELER:** And we were successful through our legislative efforts and and it created the opportunity for us not only to put a person squarely in the city of Shamokin, but also create a revitalization plan and have that completed first so that there's a road map for the future to be able to have a sort of a playbook on how to help the community invest over time.

**PIPA:** The person that SEDA-COG detailed to Shamokin is Betsy Kramer. Every person I talked to raved about Betsy and what she's meant to the town. Betsy explains how she came to Shamokin.

**KRAMER:** So, I was working in economic development at SEDA-Council of Governments. That's where I was working. Prior to that, I had my own business for 12 years. And I live just eight miles away from here. So, I saw firsthand the decline of the city of Shamokin. So, it was already something that was very exciting to me to offer something to help the city.

So, I started in it would have been July 1 of 2019. We have an office here in the city of Shamokin and our very first step was to get an RFP out for what is now the Go Shamokin plan, which is ... it is a strategic plan.



**PIPA:** Not only was Betsy instrumental in helping the city develop a plan, she provided hands-on expertise and experience in finding the funds to turn plans into reality. I asked Betsy what that entails.

**KRAMER:** You need the human contact, you need a person, you need the capacity. So, the getting the grant's the easy part oftentimes. Although, a lot of grants are not that easy to get—I've got to be honest. But it's the it's knowing that the grant exists. It's knowing that you can apply for a waiver for the match. Huge. It's getting the legislative support—you need to have the connections the, once again, the human touch, the capacity to reach out to the the legislators. Super important that we cannot underemphasize the legislative support of projects enough.

But then it's also implementation of the grant. It's the proper reporting. Some of these can be very difficult and time consuming. And if you take a city like a Shamokin that does not have the local capacity, you almost require something like this, either full-time or a circuit writer or whatever, to actually help the city.

And if you wouldn't mind, I would love to share the true numbers of what we're talking about. So, I mentioned before that my job was to get a new strategic plan for this city and then also to implement the initiatives. We're talking about, to date, 13 million that we've received. And I just applied for another 2 million. And I have two more projects that I plan to apply this fall, and then that's not including for next year.

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**PIPA:** Some of those funds are coming from the state of Pennsylvania. One source is the Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program, which provides support for the construction of economic improvement projects such as the hotels Andy Twigg is planning. Another is a state initiative called the Keystone Communities Program, which invests in community partnerships. And there are other state programs that have provided support.

Other funds are coming directly from the federal government, through programs run by different agencies. These include support that the Environmental Protection Agency is providing to deal with brownfields and blight. Financing offered through the Economic Development Administration, which is a part of the Department of Commerce, to support small businesses.

That initial \$300,000 investment from the state to detail Betsy for a few years has already resulted in \$13 million for the city, with three million in applications lined up. But it's not just about pulling in investment —Betsy has also been instrumental in helping the community itself get organized.

**KRAMER:** So, moving forward from the plan and getting the grants is really getting the ownership of the community because I'm not going to be here forever. So, it was really important to make sure that—they have a "SABER" which is the Shamokin Area Businesses for Economic Revitalization. They also have FAR, which is Faith Alliance for Revitalization. Another thing that we developed was an EDA, which is an Economic Development Authority, which is actually an IDA doing business as an EDA, but that's something that didn't exist before. So, now we have a group that is fabulous at figuring out how do we attract developers.

**PIPA:** That's a lot of acronyms, but it's also a sign of a community getting organized. The churches coming together in an alliance to support the community; the town creating an economic development authority to be able to take the lead on the redevelopment of properties; and a major force has been the creation of a new association of business owners. Here is Kathy Vetovich again, the investor who turned the church into a coffee shop, describing how this group, the Shamokin Area Businesses for Economic Revitalization, better known as SABER, got started.

**VETOVICH:** Actually, it was the idea of Kurt Masser, who's our state representative. He said there was a lot of individual investments, a lot of individual people working on their own to make something happen. Let's get that together. So, we had a meeting and out of that grew SABER, the Shamokin Area Businesses for Economic Revitalization. SABER is just a group of businesses, again, like-minded, trying to develop, let's say, events to bring people from outside of Shamokin into the city.

We just opened a set of historic steps, the 99 steps that were closed just because of disrepair since 2008. Within seven months, SABER actually spearheaded a "Step Up Shamokin," because we wanted people to step up and save the steps. We got those steps open in seven months. We raised \$150,000. That was a SABER initiative. So, we do all of that to really, again, draw people in and help the businesses in any way we can.

**PIPA:** Members of SABER kept brainstorming ways to bring people into town. Former Mayor John Brown describes his conversations with the AOAA's director, Dave Porzi.

**BROWN:** Dave and I became very good friends. We had a standard Tuesday night meeting. Every Tuesday night, Dave and I were together. Talking, discussing things. What could we do? How do we get those folks off the hill to come down here? We tried different things of having businesses run things. The riders themselves didn't want to leave their primary vehicle, trailer, that kind of stuff up there to drive down here in their truck and eat lunch, eat dinner, do things in town while all of their very expensive equipment—I found out throughout ... I thought four wheelers and dirt bikes were like when I was a kid. They're not. They're worth more than my house—they didn't want to leave it on the hill and come down here. Or when they were leaving up there, we don't have the infrastructure for them to park big trucks with trailers and things like that so they could stop at our businesses. They would drive in here, drive right through here, and go back to wherever their hotel was or whatnot. The next morning, the trek would start again. They'd go up on a hill. They drive right through the place. We got nothing out of it.

So, the plan was hatched. Let's do a couple events where we open some streets.

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Let them drive from the AOAA on their bikes, OHVs, into the city, park at the businesses, and see what we got. The first time we did it was an absolute eye opener, I think, for everybody. Our businesses didn't have enough seats, they didn't have enough staff, and they didn't have enough product. There were that many people came off the hills that came down here.

First time we did it, it was very controlled, like a parade. There was somebody at every corner directing traffic, stopping things, letting them letting the folks come through. Resource-wise, it

was overwhelming. We had to find a different way. We did two or three of those kind of rides and the the amount of interest was there. So, we started to hatch a plan to make certain streets OHV-friendly all the time through an ordinance.

**PIPA:** SABER was instrumental in proposing and passing the ordinance. Some townspeople were resistant, partly because they were concerned about the noise and what they saw as potential for mischief, partly because they didn't see this as Shamokin's identity—and they just didn't think it would work. First Andy Twigg, and then Kathy Vetovich, describe the change.

**TWIGGAR:** I view the the timing of the revitalization projects and programs and the revitalization of the whole area, it's going to take a long time. We didn't arrive to where we're at now overnight. The decline of the area has been happening since the 1950s, 1960s. Losing approximately 10% every ten years of our population. So, there's a lot of momentum there. And we see it in the mindset of folks who just kind of stream this constant negativity.

Part of our charge through SABER, through the business community, has been how do we reverse that? How do we reverse that thinking of, like, oh, I'm just used to getting kicked. So, I'm just waiting for the other, the other the other boot to come swinging in.

It takes a lot of mindset readjustment to say we've got a beautiful little town with a lot of little gems, and and taking advantage of those and showcasing them is what we need to do. How can I help?

**VETOVICH:** So, think about taking a coal-region town who's very much brought up in that hard work mentality. And we need our mills and we need our coal and we need to just work hard and transitioning that into a tourism destination. And that's what we're doing here. So, it's been a struggle for a lot of the individuals who have grown up and have been bred in this hard work mentality to really be that destination.

So, about a year and a half ago, the city passed an ordinance to allow a portal so that the AOAA riders could ride right into our town. We were the first city in the country to do that. Many other villages and communities have, but we're told we were the first city to allow that. Now we have ATVs driving up and down our streets. I personally love it because that's bringing revenue. That again, changing to that tourism mentality is difficult. But let's embrace that because that is our future.

**PIPA:** This direct link between the AOAA and the town now ties the two more closely together, and offers community leaders, investors, and businesses with new opportunities. Here's Jim Backes from the AOAA explaining what it means.

**BACKES:** That's unique if you can drive your your ATV into the city of Shamokin, go to a restaurant, go get your gas, and go back to the trail. And and when we have the hotels open, then it'll even be better because it can work the opposite way. They'll come into the hotel, park, get on their ATV. And and part of the experience, I mean, if you're an ATV rider, you want to drive your ATV. You don't want to be driving your vehicle.

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So, part of the attraction there is that you can leave the hotel on your ATV and come to the AOAA and ride all day and come back and and go to dinner. And, you know, you're on your ATV the whole time. So, it's, you know, it's a full circle enjoyment of an activity that you like to do. And we're definitely seeing that, you know, that happen.

**PIPA:** As I listened to everyone describe these groups coming together, brainstorming, and trying out new ideas, and as I heard them describe the negotiations in the community about whether it would be worth it to pass the ordinance, it got me wondering—what about the politics? Were political differences at play or affecting this at all?

So, I asked the politicians. First you'll hear from current mayor Rick Ulrich, who was county coroner, which is an elected position in Pennsylvania, for 12 years until 2002. He just became Shamokin's mayor this year.

And then you'll hear former Mayor John Brown, who worked as a police officer in the town for 20 years and ran for city council after he retired. Here's what they had to say about whether differences in political parties played a part during all these discussions.

**ULRICH:** You know when it matters? Election time. You know, and it's not even, I'd say, overwhelming then. It's just that you've got to run on, you know, your different parties. But, like, the current council now, we don't even—I don't, and I don't think anyone else does—looks at what political party you are. We're looking at Shamokin. And the only time we look at it is when it's petition time and, you know, election time.

**BROWN:** And that's the nice part about being a small town is it's more of—it's not an adversarial, it's it's more of a friendly thing, for the most part. When I first decided to run, being a policeman—no politics. You weren't allowed, you couldn't go to the voting booths in your uniform. Totally no way. You didn't get involved. You didn't put a sign on your house. You did nothing. So, coming into politics was really an eye opener for me.

First time I got my petition, go and get my petition, all right, I have to get 100 Republican signatures. So, I start going through the list. They give you a walking list of all the Republicans in Shamokin. All of my friends apparently were Democrats. AS as I go through this, I you know, like some of it and I never discussed with them. Are you a Republican? Democrat? You know, because it was a policeman's thing. You stayed out of it. You didn't discuss politics. You didn't have that. So, my first time it was a struggle going through the list, going, Geez, I thought I just I'd go to this guy's house, that guy's house, I'd get their signatures or their wife's signatures. For the most part, all my friends were Democrats!

So, it really, no. Politics, political party politics at this level, not even really thought about. You know, the big national issues that divide aren't here in local Shamokin. We're just trying to make things better for everybody. And it doesn't matter who you are or where you came.

**ULRICH:** Absolutely. Absolutely.

**BROWN:** So, that was my story with with politics. All my friends were Democrats.

[music]

**PIPA:** That brings us to present day. Lots of important pieces have been put in place. But what are the prospects for Shamokin from here? For the AOAA, it just continues to grow. Its director, Dave Porzi, told me about another \$10.5 million investment from the state using funds from the federal Bureau of Mine Reclamation to take care of a dangerous water impoundment and holes left by the mining. As they cleaned up, they took the opportunity to save the boulders, many of them the size of a car, to create an obstacle course called the Mammoth Trail.

**PORZI:** Now, the Mammoth Trail itself, the end result, turned out to be a total of 6,600 feet of extreme rock trail, 4,400 feet in a straight line. We've had a number of people come to attempt to run this obstacle and only two have completed it in about 4 hours. The trail itself is very extreme. Most obstacles or trails you go out in the United States it's an obstacle then a trail. An obstacle then a trail. With this, there is no break. It's a chess match the entire time you are on the rock obstacle itself, because you don't get a break. And it's very mentally challenging. It's physically challenging. And it's very challenging to the vehicles that they bring here. But they are purpose-built to come run on this. And when was the last time an attraction like this was ever opened? Never. This was completely manmade and arguably the largest manmade rock obstacle in the United States and probably the world.

But on top of it is you've got a conservation project because now in the areas that were around this pit are now planted with certain areas with certain types of grass. Some areas are planted with certain hardwood trees, things like that. And we are truly blessed that the end result is what you see here. It really is something to see.

**PIPA:** In fact, Porzi told me, part of that conservation project is a grove of experimental trees trying to recreate the heyday of the American Chestnut, which once filled eastern U.S. forests but became virtually extinct due to blight at the turn of the 20th century. So, for the AOAA, the future seems bright.

**PORZI:** What a lot of people don't understand is for myself, my staff, my board, this is not a job, this is not a volunteer thing for the board. This whole project comes from the heart. We are extremely passionate about what we do here, and we want to continue to see it grow and grow and flourish.

[music]

The future of the ATV, or the future of the Anthracite Outdoor Adventure Area: the sky's the limit and we're not settling on where we are. We want to keep moving forward and making more attractions and making this a destination on the Eastern Seaboard that it's a must see, it's a must go to.

**PIPA:** What about the prospects of Shamokin itself? Well, SEDA-COG just finalized a grant to extend Betsy Kramer for two more years. Betsy ticked off multiple things she had planned for that time, like implementing a comprehensive update to the city's zoning ordinance and taking care of blighted properties through EPA and other funds.

**KRAMER:** There's so much good. There's so much good that's happening. There's developers coming in from outside the area. So, we do have people that grew up here, want to see their community better, and, not knocking them—thrilled for them—but now we have people from

outside the community that have just heard that this is the place that you need to invest in, and they have invested in this community. That's huge. There's so much that we're looking forward to.

**PIPA:** At the same time, the revitalization of Shamokin is just at the beginning. If you drive through the town, you'll see plenty of buildings in need of repair or maybe even tearing down. Kathy Vetovich, the president of SABER, recognizes that a real renaissance will take time.

**VETOVICH:** When I first got involved in SABER, I think it was three years ago, maybe four—time flies—I was like, “Come on, let's do this, let's do this.” And I'm always picked on, just so you know, I'm always picked on because I want things to happen now. Like the *News Item*, our local newspaper has said, “Oh, well, Kathy Vetovich said it's not happening fast enough.” Well, yeah, everybody that knows Kathy Vetovich knows that she's going to say that every meeting.

I thought at that time that, give me five years, give us five years, and we'll be out of this. Now, looking at it three or four years later, it's going to take time. And what I've had to tell myself over and over is we didn't get here overnight. Right? We started our decline in the city of Shamokin probably in the sixties, and that's the 1960s. So, we've been here 60 years. And on that decline.

Now, even when I was young in the '80s—I won't say the '70s—Even when I was young in the '70s and '80s, we still had a bustling downtown. Again, we were the source for a lot of retail. That decline kind of kept going and now we're not.

So, when you look at that, you want, you hope, that it's going to be several years. But in the reality, I'm looking at maybe another ten years of kind of ... as someone said to me, we hit the bottom and you can feel the bounce. But that that bottom was deep. So, we're still struggling to get up that mountain that we came down from the other side.

**PIPA:** Jim Backes, who helped start the AOAA, feels much the same.

**BACKES:** It's invigorating to see the energy, the change, people coming into the area. And it's also gratifying when somebody come in from the area and says, “Man, what a beautiful community you have here, and the people are so friendly and we love your trails.”

I was up the AOAA the other day. And, you know, there's some people from New Jersey and they were telling me the same thing, like, “I love this area.” This is ... So, that makes you proud when somebody tells you that, you know, they really enjoy coming to your area and spending time in in your town, there's really a sense of pride in that. And and that's happening more and more.

And now I'm having different people call me, “Hey, how can I invest?” We have some, you know, people that have left the area and have done quite well and they're looking for ways to invest, not even so much—because they can invest anywhere, but they'd like to see their hometown taken care of. They see the sense of pride.

[music]

We've turned the corner. There's no doubt in my mind we've turned the corner. It's just how fast we can go uphill now. And we want to keep our foot on the gas here and see what we can do.

**PIPA:** Listening to Jim Backes, it strikes me that Shamokin the town has its own version of the Mammoth Trail to climb. It's making progress towards bringing back the hustle and bustle of the town that I remember growing up in.

What has helped get them to this point? At the heart of it, it's been local people creating local solutions. The collaboration among local leaders and investors has created a vision for a better future for the town, using their assets—the beauty of previously mined land, their heritage, architecture of the town—to bring new vitality to their economy by attracting visitors and tourists.

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It's been important for them to come together and be creative, so the town could benefit from the growth of the adventure area. They also needed outside help and expertise. What Betsy Kramer and SEDA-COG have provided has been invaluable. And they needed public investment: tens of millions both to reclaim and conserve the land, as well as to address blighted properties in town, finance new businesses, and update streetscapes and infrastructure.

All of this has relied on forging a new identity, one that builds upon the community's past, and brings a sense of renewed hope. It's meant bucking years of negativity to see the possibility for this new future. And Shamokin has assets that other rural communities have lost: it still has a local newspaper, for example, and it's kept its local hospital.

With all that, Shamokin is still in the early stages of renewal. Ultimately success will depend on sustained effort, patience, and investment. Mayor Rick Ulrich sums it up.

**ULRICH:** I just believe in my heart that something really good is going to come out of all this for Shamokin. And we gotta believe, you know, we can't give up and just be those naysayers like, "Oh, it's over, it's done." No. Anything worth something you fight for. And we're going to fight.

[music]

**PIPA:** The local leaders in Shamokin have made a great start towards climbing that mammoth trail. They're dealing with the obstacles and they can see the top of the mountain coming into view. It's a matter of continued navigation and commitment from here. Thanks for listening to their journey.

In our next episode, we will travel to the southwest, to learn more about what's happening in Globe, Arizona. I look forward to you joining me there.

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I’m Tony Pipa, and this is “Reimagine Rural.”