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## Council of Churches offers fine-tuned assistance programs

At 344 N Marshall St, the Council of Churches (CoC) headquarters rests behind a thrifty edifice: The simple white building is fronted with a modest parking lot and is adorned with little more than a few signs to identify the organization. But within those walls there runs an intricately patterned network of community services.

The CoC was initially formed under a different name in 1947 to increase unity and cooperation among the many churches and denominations resident in Lancaster County. The partnership has since expanded into an extensive system of community services supported by well over 100 local congregations.

A few doors beyond the front lobby lies the CoC's food bank—what Assistant Director Lindsey Hess

describes as, “*By far, the biggest*” program run through the facility. The bank provides the usual dry and canned goods, as well as refrigerated items such as meat, eggs, and butter. **The program has recently been reconstructed to a “client choice” model, in which food recipients are allowed to hand-select their groceries to best fit the needs and preferences of their families.**

For this process, the bank is arranged like a scaled-down supermarket. Staff or volunteers guide clients through the selection process, which typically ends with a cart full of free groceries. By closely engaging with clients, the CoC is able to continually refine their donation requests to better align with user preferences. Most of these donations come from participating churches and some individuals.

## Phở Thanh Thúy: Full of fresh Vietnamese creations

Just along the initial drag of N Prince St. (603), right across from the Clipper Stadium—there it is on your left: Phở Thanh Thúy, Downtown Lancaster's one and only Vietnamese restaurant. On the outside, there are few visual hints—no cultural images of rice paddies or sprawling rivers or water buffalo. **There is simply a plain white sign reading: “PHO THANH THUY / VIETNAMESE NOODLE HOUSE.”**

Inside, the walls are lightly decorated, here and there, with objects representing a Vietnamese heritage. But decor is not the reason to visit Phở Thanh Thúy. What makes this restaurant unique and well worthwhile is, far and away, the cuisine. The culinary palate of Vietnam is characteristically fresh, making ample use of raw herbs like

lemongrass, mint, and cilantro. This is evident at Phở Thanh Thúy upon arrival, when the server sets each table with a plate of fresh bean sprouts, bordered by the long shoots of various zesty herbs.

Gỏi Cuốn is a good way to get started. These egg-roll-like appetizers are tightly packed in an unfriend, translucent rice wrapper and filled with lettuce, bean sprouts, pork, and shrimp.

For an entree that can satisfy the most Western of appetites, try the Cơm Tấm Đặc Biệt. This dish features a lively spread of rice, two kinds of grilled pork, and a slice of Vietnamese omelet. The meal is accompanied by a small bowl of fish sauce, an orange, lightly sweet mixture that carries a subtle depth of flavor. **[Continued on back]**

And we would be remiss to ignore the rice noodle soup. The wide, steaming bowls of Phở Chín Nạm hold a rich beef broth with slices of beef brisket

and flank, a dense tangle of light rice noodles, and strong presence of fresh cilantro.

## Some surprised to learn of Marriott tax exemption

Lately, *NewsLanc* has been hearing from local citizens who had only learned of the Marriott Hotel's tax-exempt status in the wake of the recent grand opening. One reader commented, "*Did I miss something? I thought the tax revenues were the big selling point.*" Indeed, those who met the tax exemption announcement with surprise did miss something: This legal arrangement has been essentially in the bag since 2005.

In the late 90s, the Watt & Shand building had rested vacant for several years, and was becoming a dim monolith on the southeast corner of Penn Square. Around this time, a proposal was put forward to renovate the historic structure into a new Lancaster branch of the Harrisburg Area Community College. This proposal, of course, did not work out. And ironically, one prominent criticism—from City Hall on down—was that this operation would have to be exempt from real estate tax.

Flash forward to the Spring of 2005: The Penn Square Partners (PSP), owners of the Watt & Shand property, were aggressively pursuing plans to develop the space into a luxury hotel in accordance with the Convention Center Authority's approaching project next door. That March, the PSP approached the School District of Lancaster Board, requesting special tax breaks to ease the cost of construction. The PSP stressed that the Board's compliance would make or break the project.

**Despite immense pressure from a number of public figures, the School Board did not approve the PSP's financing plan, instead endorsing a plan of its own, which would allow for some tax exemption, but required higher rates and stronger guarantees of compensation. The PSP rejected SDOL's plan as financially**

impossible, and, days later, declared the project "dead."

Even as workers began scraping promotional Marriott signs from windows of the Watt & Shand, then-Mayor Charlie Smithgall worked relentlessly to find a solution that would save the project, which had already lined up millions of dollars in State-level grants.

**Within weeks, Smithgall offered his solution: The Redevelopment Authority of the City of Lancaster (RACL) would buy the Watt & Shand, more or less eliminating the property from local tax rolls and bypassing SDOL opposition.** The PSP could then lease the property from the City, which would also share considerable responsibility for much of the PSP's construction debt. The next month, City Council approved the measure, establishing an arrangement that has remained largely intact.\*

On the day of the Convention Center/Marriott June 2009 opening, the Lancaster County Property Assessment Office deemed the Marriott Hotel tax exempt. This announcement—which could not technically occur until the facility opened for business—was little more than a formality, only confirming what City Council had assumed four years ago in approving the leasing arrangement with PSP.

*\*Editor's note: The above is the sequence of events as reported in the local print media. Whether the decision to shift ownership from PSP to RACL had been made beforehand and whether the "scraping" of "promotional Marriott signs" was disingenuously intended to create greater public support are matters to be explored in the Convention Center Series at a later date.*

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