

PRESS RELEASE

PITTSBURGH CITY COUNCIL LEADERSHIP, COUNTY EXECUTIVE, WILKINSBURG CDC COLLABORATE TO ENSURE WILKINSBURG RESIDENTS CAN VOTE FOR THEIR FUTURE

City leaders say they will vote 'yes' on a full merger this time next year, after collaborating to educate citizens on merger impacts; announcement comes on heels of post agenda where experts will testify that fully combining both municipalities will positively impact city, school finances

(PITTSBURGH, PA) Feb. 2 An effort to fully merge Wilkinsburg and Pittsburgh will officially be voted down by Pittsburgh City Council next week – with a caveat. Council leadership held a press conference today outside Council Chambers, right before fiscal experts testified to a full merger's financial impact on city taxpayers, saying that many council members are already convinced that a full merger is mutually beneficial to both municipalities' residents. But before Council votes in a majority to allow Wilkinsburg to vote to be a full part of Pittsburgh's family, more time is needed to ensure the union has a 'stable foundation.'

"The annexation of the Borough of Wilkinsburg would be beneficial to both Pittsburgh and Wilkinsburg," said Councilman Reverend Ricky Burgess, whose district abuts Wilkinsburg. Pittsburgh will benefit from the increased population, land and income while Wilkinsburg will benefit from reduced taxes, better public services and potential new economic development. In some ways the annexation has already begun; the city already collects Wilkinsburg trash and fights Wilkinsburg fires, and Wilkinsburg parents send their middle- and high-school children to Pittsburgh schools."

Flanked by Allegheny County Executive Rich Fitzgerald and Wilkinsburg merger advocates, council people said that they will vote in favor of Wilkinsburg's annexation approximately this time next year, following more fact-finding and public participation. The support comes after Councilman Burgess amended legislation this morning to create a special committee on the annexation, giving each city councilman responsibilities through their standing committees in evaluating how respective departments can merge most effectively. The effort will evaluate, document and publicize the advantages of annexation and seek to garner more public support.

"After Council's formal investigation and thorough public participation, approximately, one year from now, in 2023, if brought before me, I will vote in favor of Wilkinsburg annexation and encourage Wilkinsburg residents to approve it in their May 2023 Primary referendum," continued Burgess.

The Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation (WCDC), who is leading the annexation effort on behalf of citizens and local business owners, has already received local foundation and Wilkinsburg resident funding support to study the merger's financial and service implications. PFM and HR&A who helped the city emerge from Act 47 have already performed several analyses. Among those being shared publicly today are the Wilkinsburg, Pittsburgh Public School merger, which indicates that PPS will profit from a merger. Now, Council says, it's time to digest the work that has already been done and start meaningfully engaging city departments in the nuts and bolts of expanding services.

"I appreciate the work that has been done by City Council on this issue, led by President Theresa Kail Smith and Reverend Ricky Burgess. I congratulate them on the success that the city has shown through its work over the past decade that has resulted in vibrancy, economic growth, and a new generation of young people moving here," said County Executive Rich Fitzgerald. "It wasn't long ago that people were leaving the city, but that story has changed. Now, municipalities want to be part of Pittsburgh's vibrancy. This is something that should be celebrated and I commend City Council for working collaboratively with community stakeholders to allow this initiative to move forward next year and for providing the opportunity for the Wilkinsburg community to vote."

After a two-year-long community planning effort led by the nonprofit Wilkinsburg Community Development Corporation, over 1,000 Wilkinsburg residents signed a petition asking to be annexed to Pittsburgh. The residents, aware of Wilkinsburg's oppressive property tax rates, which are twice the rate of Pittsburgh's, continual decrease in population and rising cost to provide residents' critical services, pursued the only legally viable vehicle to a merger, the 1903 Annexation Law. Under the law, Pittsburgh City Council must take a majority vote to take Wilkinsburg under its wing. Then, Wilkinsburg residents would vote by referendum, choosing their fate through the democratic process.

"The Wilkinsburg CDC has done a great job in getting this ball rolling on behalf of Wilkinsburg residents. We're on mile 21 of the marathon – now it's time for everyone who cares about what's best for Wilkinsburg, the city and region to roll up their sleeves and take it the rest of the way home," said Councilman Anthony Coghill, who is leading the post agenda. "A lot of the heavy lifting has been done already, so I suspect that Council chairs will be able to be efficient and effective in this work ahead."