

# Tradepoint Atlantic gives new hope for the ‘Point’

By: [Joe Nathanson](#) December 8, 2016



When I arrived in Baltimore in 1970, the largest single private employer in the region was Bethlehem Steel, with its 30,000 workers busy at the various stages of steel production at Sparrows Point. The “Point,” as it was fondly known, had a glorious history, having supplied the girders for construction of the Golden Gate Bridge, the cables for the George Washington Bridge and essential components for armaments in both World Wars.

The 1970s were marked by cycles of occasional increased demand for the local steel production followed by periods of cooling off. During those production lulls, the workers who would be laid off, many of them residents of Dundalk, Essex and Middle River as well as Baltimore city, would wait patiently until they would eventually be recalled to their unionized jobs.

But not all would be recalled. With those successive cycles of ups and downs for steel production, the ranks of the steelworkers were declining.

Working in an advisory economic development capacity on the staff of Baltimore’s regional planning agency in the early 1980s, I remember meeting with the local chamber of commerce, the local community college and other stakeholders. We discussed the need to recognize that steel production, buffeted by foreign competition and newer technologies that required fewer workers, would not lead to the rehiring of all who had lost jobs. Consideration would have to be given to diversifying the economy. Workers would have to allow for the possibility of training for new occupations. These were not always welcome messages to the local workforce.

By 2001, Bethlehem Steel’s run had come to an end in the form of corporate bankruptcy. After a string of successive attempts at the revival of steelmaking at the Point, the final shoe dropped about four years ago and the final 2,000 workers ended their last shift.

## **Open house**

I recently returned to the Sparrows Point area for the first time in many years. This occasion was an open house sponsored by the newest owner of the site and the opportunity to learn the details of their plans for the project, now branded as Tradepoint Atlantic.

Based on its stellar assets, Tradepoint Atlantic should be an excellent site for distribution and logistics companies. The 3,100-acre site not only has access to a deep-water port, but it has excellent connections to interstate highways and both long haul and short line railroads.

And indeed, the first announced tenants of the site – FedEx, Atlantic Forest Products and an Under Armour distribution center – are poised to take advantage of the site’s best features.

The economic impact study prepared by the Sage Policy Group estimates that 40 percent of America’s population and more than half of Canada’s are within a day’s drive of the Tradepoint Atlantic location. The study further estimates that 9,500 direct, on-site jobs (based on the master land use plan) and a total of 17,000 jobs (direct plus indirect and induced) could be generated by the project if proposed construction can be completed between 2020 and 2025. This would also mean annual income to workers across the region on the order of \$1.1 billion.

For some of the estimated 200 people at the open house this was good news, the first positive movement toward bringing new jobs to area in many years. But for others, this was more bad news. One person questioned the prospect of warehouse distribution jobs earning \$12.50 to \$13.50. Some in the audience were surely comparing this to wages three times this amount a generation ago.

## **Fair deal**

Perhaps the most useful question of the evening was posed by a representative of the Sparrows Point High School guidance counseling office: What skills should we be imparting to our students for the new jobs that will be coming along? The same question could be asked by those at the local community college (the Dundalk and Essex campuses of the Community College of Baltimore County) on behalf of adults ready for retraining.

Great credit should be accorded the new owners of the Sparrows Point site. Not only have they taken on and made substantial progress on the vast environmental cleanup required to remove toxic materials from over a century of steelmaking. In organizing the Tradepoint Atlantic site plan, they have created a realistic vision for the future economic use of the land. If some manufacturers should see an opportunity for profitable enterprise there, so much the better.

The developers of Tradepoint Atlantic are dealing fairly with the public. In their public outreach they are not overpromising. Some of the jobs may represent only a first step in the job market and not necessarily a first rung on a career ladder. But a start is better than an empty hope many held for so many years.

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