

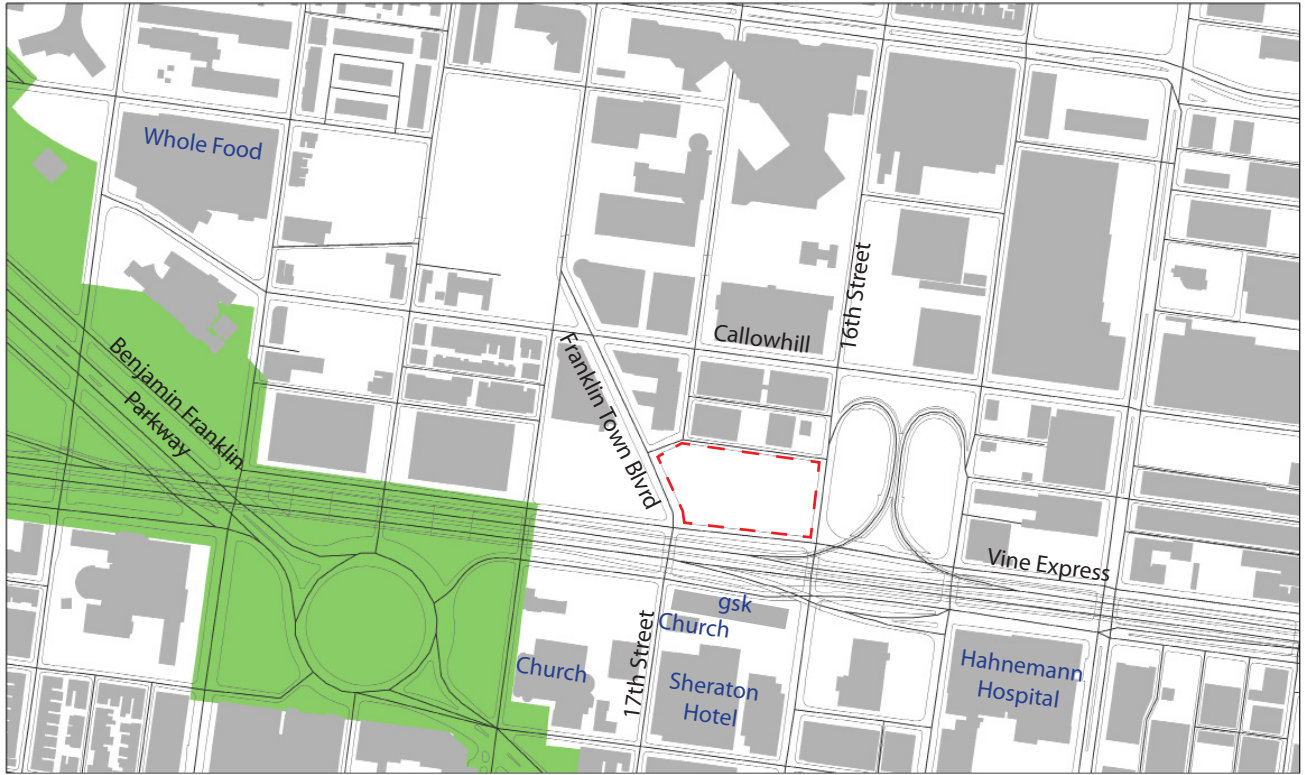
## **1700 Block North Vine Street**

A Parked Investment?



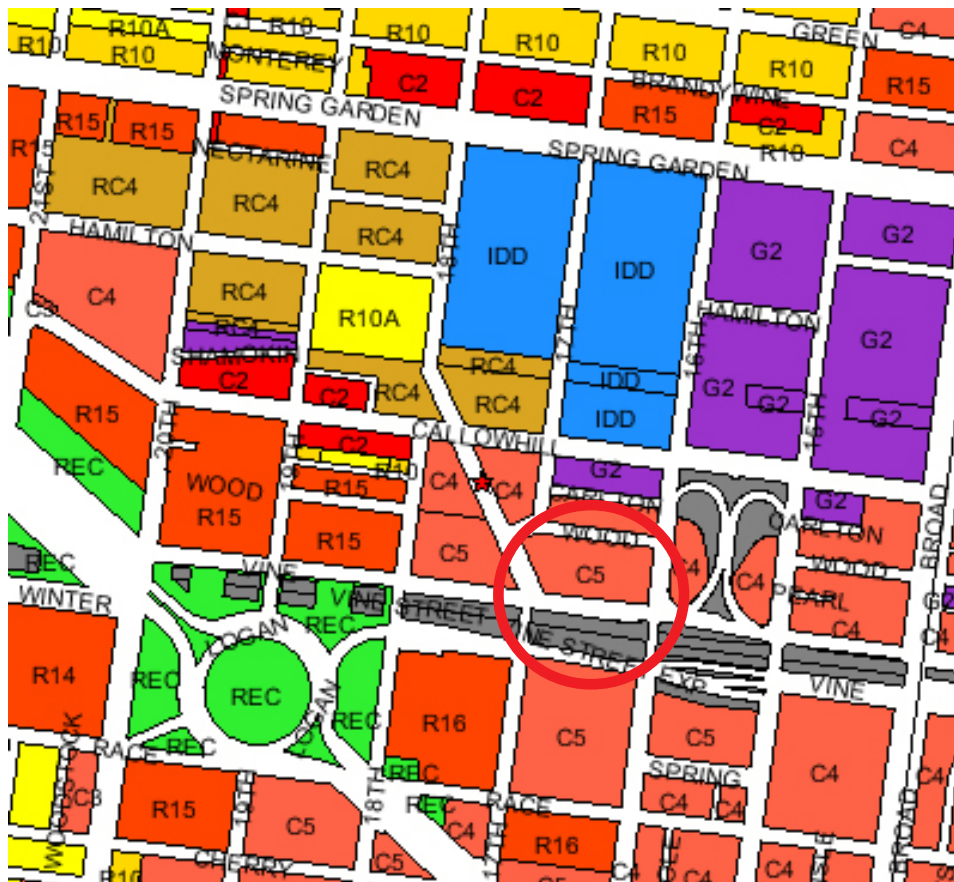
## Executive Summary

- The site sits at a prime location and is within 10 minutes walking distance to Center City Philadelphia as well as other major destinations such as museums, hospitals, colleges, restaurants, etc.
- The gap is a result of different historic planning approaches. Vine Street was specifically planned for quality of travel rather than planning for quality of life.
- The use of site as a parking space is part of a bigger issue, which is that the entire area is used as parking supply for center city's activities.
- The city should take the initiative to stop using these gaps as back of house facilities for the Center City. This would be either through upgrading public transportation, or imposing a taxation mechanism to reduce or discourage dependency on private vehicles in the center city.
- A comprehensive planning approach is required to address all the gaps in the city as a whole. Then after figuring out the best use for each gap, this information should then be published to attract the right entities to purchase or participate in the development.



0 250 500 1,000 1,500 Feet

Base map: Site Context



Zoning Map

## Site Context and Physical Condition:

The parking lot is located on the northeast corner of 17th and Vine Street. The approximate parking area is 108,120 sq.ft. and can accommodate up to 466 cars.

There are several significant properties and uses within 0.5 mile radius (10 minute walking distance). To the north there is the 20 floor residential apartment building, the Water Market building, Philadelphia Community College and Whole Food Market which is further to the northwest. To the south, there is the Sheraton Hotel, the Hahnemann University Hospital, Saint Peter and Saint Paul Cathedral, the Albanian Orthodox Church, Glaxo Smith Kline (GSK) office building. The site is also close to the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, which means that it is located within walking distance of the major museums and hotels of the city - Not to mention its proximity to the center city which is a major advantage.

In terms of accessibility, besides being within walking distance from the city center, the property is bound by 4 major streets, Vine Street to the south, Franklin Town Boulevard to the west, 16th Street to the east and Wood Street to the North. Having 4 street frontages creates a positive advantage for the site in terms the possibility of having several entrances to the site or being able to segregate service entries from the main entrance(s).

As for the zoning overlay, the property is zoned as commercial use (C5). According to this classification it is allowed for maximum of 1, 200% FAR, which translates to over three hundred feet in height above the average ground level. The zoning regulation also encourages uses that create a healthy pedestrian environment and provides a healthy economy for the city.<sup>1</sup>

## Why Fill The Gap?:

All factors indicate that this is at a prime location. There are several demographic segments that can be seen as potential markets to be served. Potential future uses may vary from commercial spaces that can support the existing community need, residential apartment building, uses complementing the existing institutions, office building to hospitality uses. The zoning ordinance also encourages having multi-use, multi-floor structure.

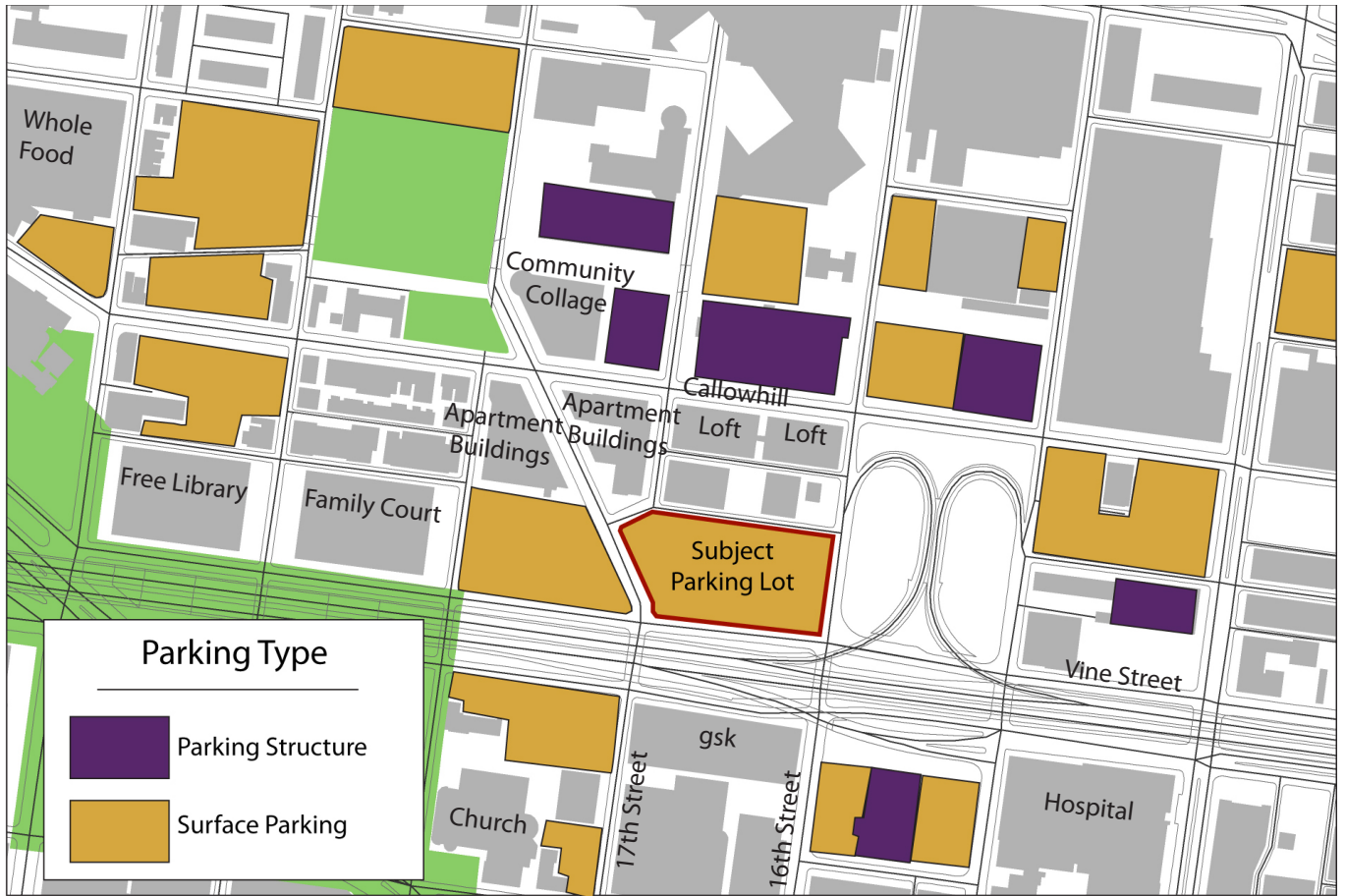
### **Obviously all these indications can not be translated to just surface parking.**

Clearly, the benefit of filling this gap does not stop at the level of just one party's interest. It would also benefit north and south Vine Street communities.

To understand the gap between the existing condition and the best economic use of the space it is important to look at the site from two different angles:

1- Current use

2-Historic circumstances that shaped the physical environment.



**This parking map excludes on-street parking.** Parking culture and supply in Center City should not be similar to parking culture and supply in the suburbs.



Image 1

The Comcast tower is less than a 10 minute walk from the site. Knowing that Comcast will bring in more jobs in the area, the demand for housing will naturally increase<sup>2</sup>

## Current Use:

### Usage pattern:

Based on weekday observation the parking space is busier between Tuesday and Thursday, while the number of users drop between Friday and Monday.

### Users:

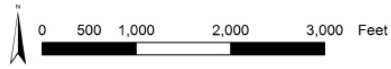
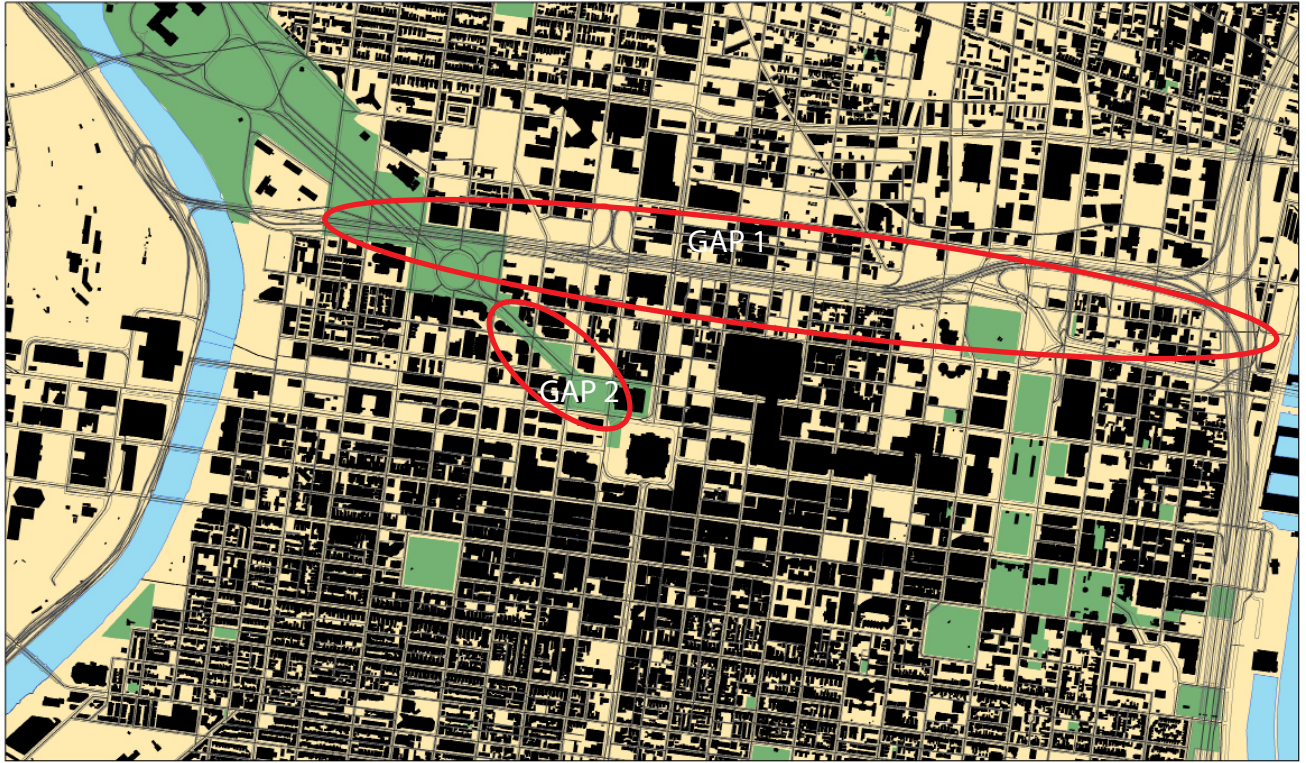
At first glance, one may think that most users of the site are from the north of Vine Street - especially the apartments located to the north. After careful observation and talking to the parking management staff, I understood that each residential, commercial or institutional uses on the north of Vine Street has provided sufficient parking space for their community, in some cases oversupplied. For example, the Whole Food Store has sufficient parking space, the two residential apartment buildings use parking structures located to their north and the Philadelphia Community College has its own parking structure. The parking lot is used by the GSK office employees, Family Court building and people working at the downtown offices. It is also used by people coming for special events at Sheraton hotel, weddings services and religious events at the churches. Unfortunately, these gaps in the fabric are used by Center City employees, especially people coming from outside center city for work. The walkable distance from the parking lot to the center city (workplace) and the closeness to highway (Vine Street) provides a quick escape from the congestion during morning and afternoon rush hours to and from the workplace. It seems that these gaps, specifically the 1700 parking block, provide the back of house facility to the activities taking place in downtown. This passive usage of the site, I believe, is a sufficient justification for the city's intervention.

### Charging rates:

According to the parking management staff, the cost to park a car is \$14 per day and \$170 per month. Employees of commercial offices (GSK office) using the parking would compensate their employees \$3 per day. The adjacent parking lot is \$160 per month, while parking in one of the parking structures would cost \$300 per month.

## Historic Background:

Each period of Philadelphia's history signified a change in the physical form of the city. The footprints of each planning era can be visibly seen today. In some areas these footprints resulted in historic marvels of the city and in other cases it created underutilized empty pockets. The first and the foremost significant planning feature is the William Penn's city grid. Fast forward, and after the rise and fall of the industrial era, the City Beautiful Movement produced the Benjamin Franklin Parkway. According to Jane Jacobs in *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, the aim of the City Beautiful was the City Monumental. Great schemes were drawn up for systems of baroqueboulevard which mainly came to nothing. These buildings were arranged



Gaps caused by Vine Street and Benjamin Franklin Parkway



along the boulevard as at Benjamin Franklin Parkway in Philadelphia...the important point was that the monuments had been sorted out from the rest of the city, and assembled into the grandest effect thought possible, the whole being treated as a complete unit, in a separate and well-defined way.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, even though Benjamin Franklin Parkway provided a great landmark for Philadelphia, it contributed to the gap in the fabric of the city.

What came with the car culture had another impact on adding physical gap in the fabric of the city. Planning for quality of travel rather than quality of life left us with more highways, even within cities. It is worth looking at the history that formed Vine Street, due to the relationship of the site with the Vine Street

With the opening of the Benjamin Franklin Bridge in 1926, Vine Street had become an important east-west arterial route through Center City Philadelphia. Because of the volume of traffic generated by the bridge in subsequent years, the Philadelphia City Council first recommended in 1930 that an elevated expressway be constructed along the Vine Street corridor. In 1945, as part of the city's postwar development plan, the Philadelphia City Planning Commission proposed a depressed six-lane expressway along the Vine Street Corridor. They proposed the route to be flanked by a service road to serve cross streets and abutting properties. They also addressed the construction of several interchanges along Vine Street. After a long approval process the construction of Vine Street began in 1957. Later, Vine Street Expressway became part of the Interstate highway system in 1956 and received, like other highways, 90 percent of Federal funding.<sup>4</sup>

The focus on addressing the transportation infrastructure, in this case Vine Street, rather than the landuse created a harsh environment. According to the Center City Planning for Growth Report, The Vine Street Expressway, an important east-west link, contributes to an enormous gap between Old City and Northern Liberties, constrains the expansion of Chinatown, interrupts the fabric of North Broad Street and creates a noisy canyon in front of the Free Library and Family Court .<sup>5</sup>

The results are clear today. Properties existing on the south of Vine Street have oriented their entrances and frontage away from the "highway". Attempts to soften Vine Street's environment through art sculptures failed. The landuse north and south of the street are like two disconnected islands. People would only cross Vine Street (on 17th street) to go to where they live, work or just park their vehicles. There aren't any commercial uses that animate the streets and provide service to the existing community - Not to mention the difficulty of construction due to the proximity of Vine Street to the site. This proximity means a need to block one of the main streets of the city (Vine Street) to provide structural support for any construction and excavation activities.



Image 2

Art sculpture at the corner of 16th Street and Vine Street. Orienting the entrance to the GSK office away from Vine Street and adding visual interest to soften the harshness of Vine Street

## Proposed Solution:

Today, with the economy shift and the efforts of the business improvement district (such as the 10 year tax abatement program) the city has witnessed a great comeback. The growth has been seen in multiple areas: residential, commercial, retail, etc. But, for the city to expedite the process of bringing in uses within the gaps, a three step strategic plan should be put into place:

First, Center City Philadelphia should take the initiative to study the context around each gap to understand the best economic use for each specific community around the gap.

The second is to look at all these gaps together as one opportunity in creating the best economic use for the city as a whole.

Third, the city should then report its finding in a manner that can attract the right entity for developing each gap. This way, they can eliminate the chance of a random interpretation of zoning regulation (like commercial, industrial, recreational, etc.). Even though the city cannot enforce what uses should come, they can take the role of guiding and advising the interested party. This approach would eliminate the chances of conflicting interests and market competition that leads to a failure of one use over another, whether being hotels, residential apartments, institutional buildings, government office buildings or just parking structure.

Phasing construction activities, if more than one entity started construction at the same time, would help avoid transportation blockage around the city center. When taking the initiative to study these sites, another layer of traffic analysis is required to phase out any construction activities.

Parallel to this activity, the city should find ways to improve bike lanes and push SEPTA to upgrade the public transportation system . Also, finding ways to discourage and reduce the use of private vehicles in Center City. This is critical to eliminate some or many of the gaps that are used today for parking. These gaps survive on cheap dollars that are generated from converting these spaces to center city back of house facilities, while waiting for property values to rise - a form of speculation.

As for this specific site, searching on the internet for news about plans for it, I found that a developer called David Grasso, an eight-year-old company, has proposed to build a \$315 million, 1.2 million square foot (a 46 story) complex. This would bring another five-star hotel chain to Center City. The proposal would complement the neighborhood with a Whole Food Market grocery.<sup>6</sup>

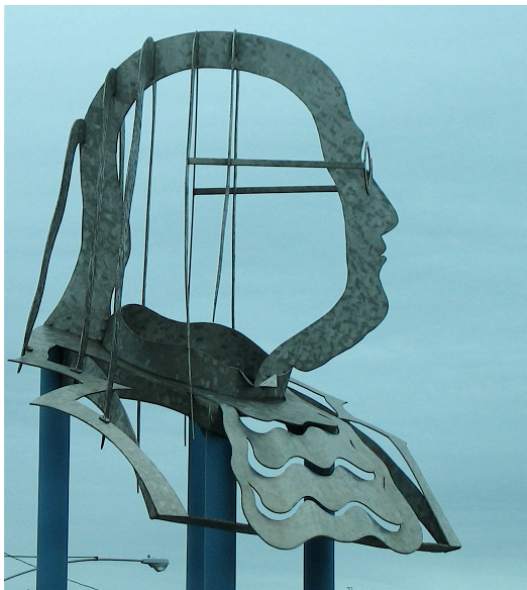


Image 3

Benjamin Franklin art sculpture, also known as Big Ben, located on cross road of 17th Street and Vine Street. A very well known sculpture to the community. Unfortunately even this interesting sculpture is not successful in capturing the interest of the passing public.

This news may have been another rumor on the internet, but it was not surprising. As analyzed, the site has potential on multiple levels. Any private entity can easily be drawn to such an investment. Hotel, grocery or residential apartment are some of recommended uses in the area.

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**Endnote:**

1. [http://www.amlegal.com/nxt/gateway.dll/Pennsylvania/philadelphia\\_pa/title14zoningandplanning](http://www.amlegal.com/nxt/gateway.dll/Pennsylvania/philadelphia_pa/title14zoningandplanning)  
And <http://www.pasda.com>
2. [http://www.bizjournals.com/philadelphia/stories/2007/04/16/daily18.html?jst=s\\_cn\\_hl](http://www.bizjournals.com/philadelphia/stories/2007/04/16/daily18.html?jst=s_cn_hl)
3. Jane Jacobs, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, vintage books, 1961, pp 24
4. <http://www.phillyroads.com/roads/vine/>
5. Center City District and Central Philadelphia Planning Development Corporation, *Center City Planning For Growth 2007 – 2012*, pp 18
6. [http://www.hotel-online.com/News/PR2006\\_4th/Oct06\\_Grasso.html](http://www.hotel-online.com/News/PR2006_4th/Oct06_Grasso.html)

**Images:**

- Image 1: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/jmhoriel/301372448/> - comcast
- Image 2: [http://www.flickr.com/photos/red\\_devil/445706730/](http://www.flickr.com/photos/red_devil/445706730/)
- Image 3: <http://www.flickr.com/photos/ruthdeb/134532886/>