

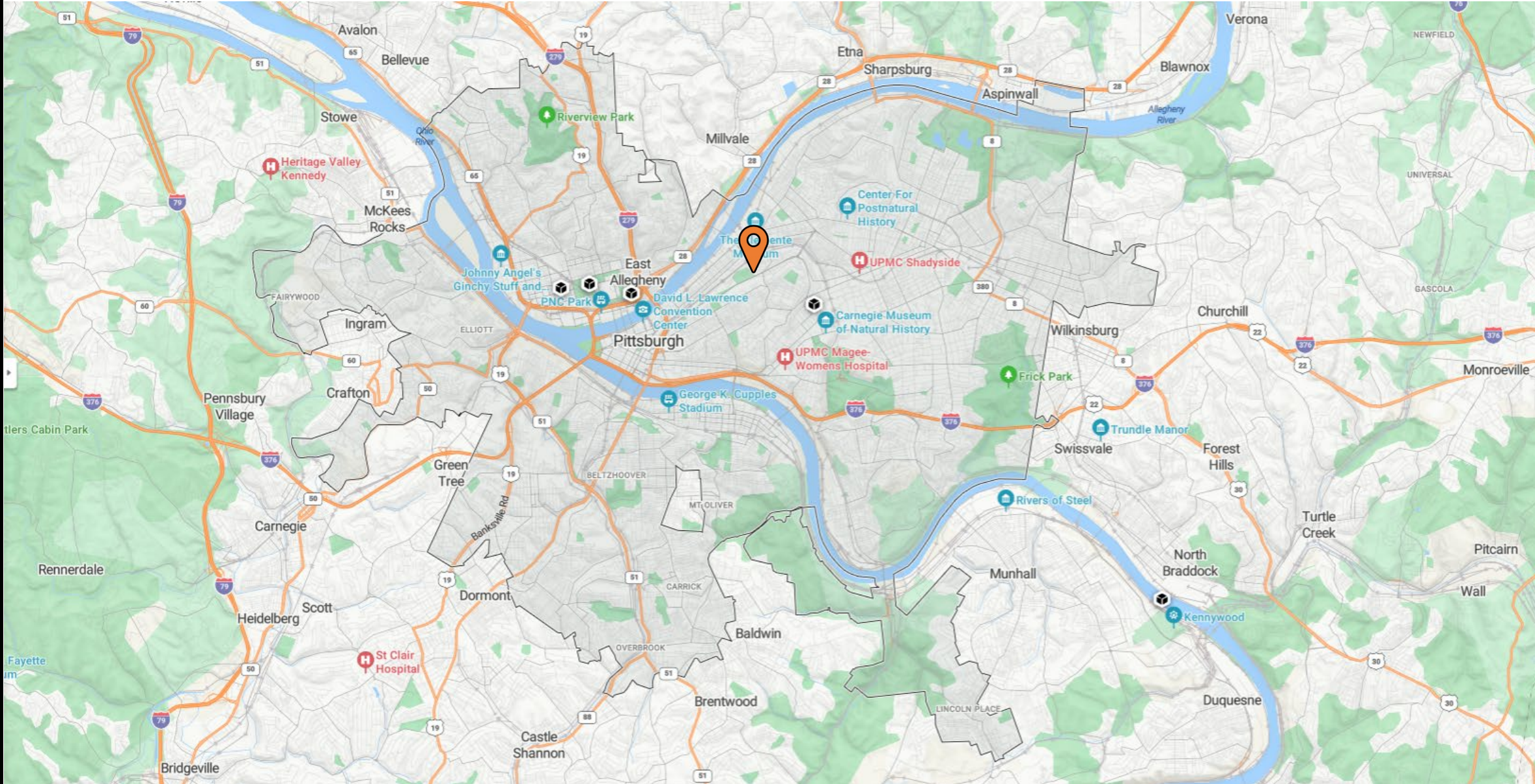


Donny's Place

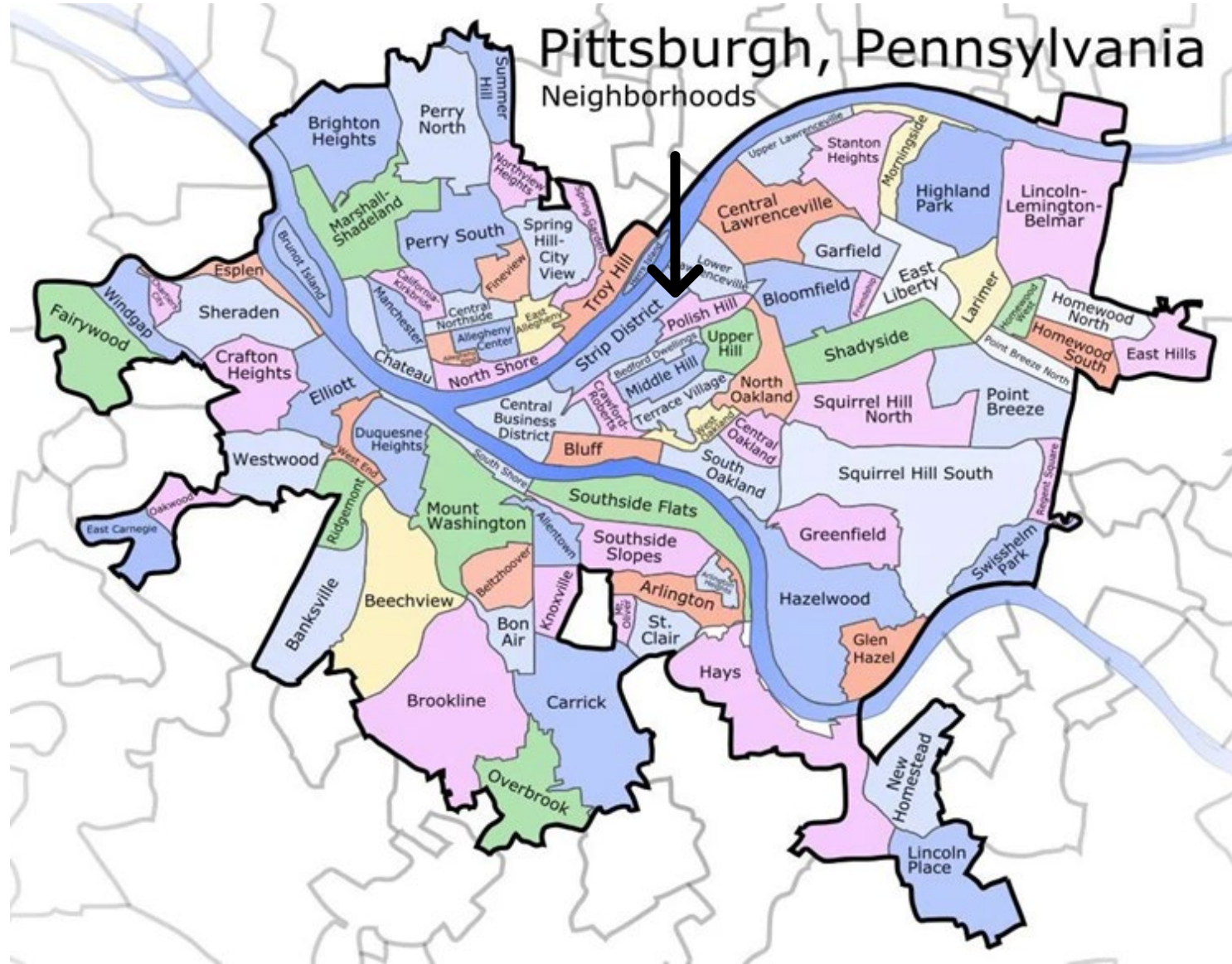
*1226 Herron Avenue
Historic Landmark Nomination
Planning Commission Presentation*

March 25, 2025

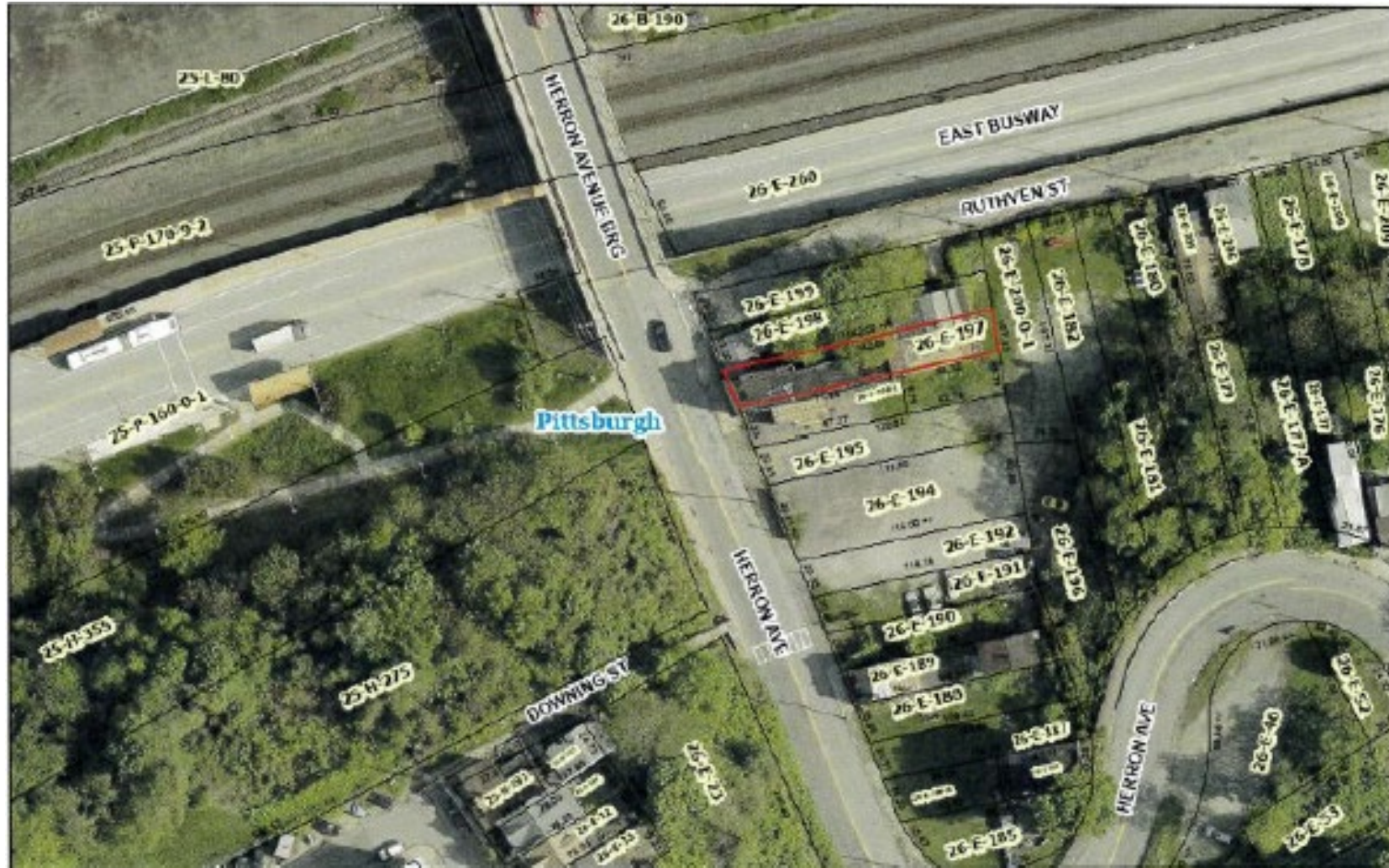
Location Map



Neighborhood Map



Site Plan



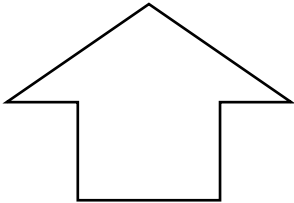


Donny's Place, facing Herron Ave, unknown source




Inside Donny's Place (Photo courtesy of Donald Thinnes Collection, Heinz History Center Detre Library and Archives)

Where we are in the process



We are here



On March 5, 2025, the Historic Review
Commission voted to provide no
recommendation to City Council

Integrity worthy of preservation or restoration



Donald "Donny" Thinnes, a gay man born and raised in Bloomfield, bought the establishment and turned it into the Norre Social Club in 1973 then making it Donny's Place and Leather Central.



Integrity worthy of preservation or restoration

Donny's Place was the site of much of the first recruitment for the still ongoing Pitt Men's Study at the University of Pittsburgh for HIV/AIDS (as described in Criterion #2). Founded in 1984 and continuing today at the University of Pittsburgh with funding from the National Institute of Health, the study "has followed a cohort of approximately 3,000 men to gather information on the epidemiology, virology, immunology, and pathology" of HIV/AIDS, according to the study website. Data from the Pitt Men's Study has been a major factor in the development of the treatment for HIV/AIDS for the last forty years.

DO YOU KNOW?

QUESTIONS:

1. Will only gay men with many different sex partners get AIDS?
2. How much free medical testing is available from the Pitt Men's Study?
3. Can Hepatitis-B be prevented?
4. Are only men who are anal receptive able to get AIDS?

ANSWERS:

1. No, AIDS can be acquired from just one sexual partner.
2. Study I — \$150.00 Study II — \$500.00 per visit
3. Yes, a safe, effective vaccine is available from your doctor, county health service and some university student health centers.
4. No, AIDS can probably be transmitted to either partner who engages in oral or anal sex.

Join the Pitt Men's Study
Call 624-2008
DO IT FOR A FRIEND

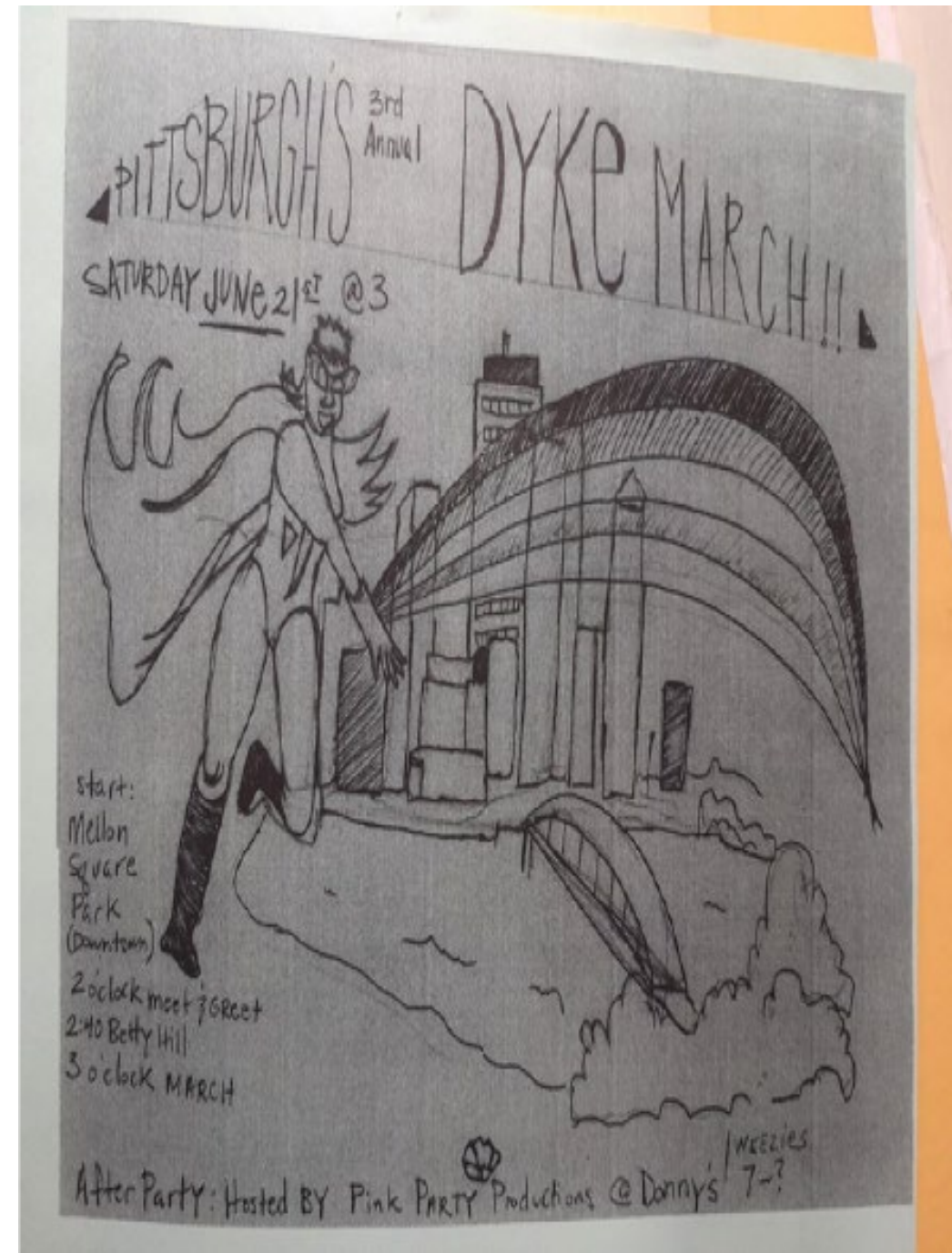
Integrity worthy of preservation or restoration



In addition to disseminating information about HIV/AIDS, Donny's Place served as a major center of harm reduction and community organizing for queer people in Pittsburgh for the entirety of its operation. In the 1980s and 1990s the bar held fundraisers for community members living with AIDS and memorials for those who died.

Integrity worthy of preservation or restoration

- ▶ Women were welcome though the bar downstairs would become a men's only space, catering to a rapidly growing interest in leather. Eventually, the upstairs would become a dance floor or a performance space, with a lit dance floor “worthy of Saturday Night Fever.”
- ▶ In the 2000s, one floor of Donny’s was for a time the city’s major lesbian bar. The lesbian dance party Sappho, hosted regularly around the city by DJ Mary Mack through 2013 and occasionally as a pop-up event since 2020, got its start at Donny’s. At least once Donny’s hosted the afterparty for the Pittsburgh Dyke March.



Integrity worthy of preservation or restoration

- ▶ Donny's Place closed briefly due to COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020. When it reopened in 2021 the liquor license for the bar had lapsed. Friend of the bar and fellow Pittsburgh Tavern Guild member Scott Noxon used There Video's liquor license to allow the venue to reopen.
- ▶ Due to development pressures and Donald Thinnes' declining health, the bar closed permanently in the fall of 2022.

Integrity worthy of preservation or restoration

- ▶ Scott Noxon joined Donald Thinnes' caretaking team, and Donny died on January 20, 2024. In response to Donny's death, community members expressed their appreciation of Donny and what his life and his bar had meant to them.
 - ▶ "My condolences to Donnie's family. We will always be great for his generosity to the LGBTQ+ community. May he rest in peace." - Michael Tevis - January 29, 2024
 - ▶ "Donny was amazing in his endless contributions to the community in which he believed in helping people in need. He gave more than most. During the Aids crisis, he lost his brother and his partner and still Donny helped those who were in need . He stands out as one of the greatest in the history of gay Pittsburgh. I will always remember Donny fondly" - Stephen Dario - February 29, 2024

Integrity worthy of preservation or restoration

- ▶ 1930s, 40s, 50s: gay nightlife in Pittsburgh happened in the Hill District's Little Harlem, queer and trans people both performing and gathering at venues like the Crawford Grill and Little Paris.
- ▶ Late 1950s: nightclubs downtown such as the Copa Club (818 Liberty Ave, later the site of Pegasus Lounge) begin to host gay acts/events/dance evenings
- ▶ 1960s: gay bars/clubs began opening around the city (David's, 632 Penn Ave, ~1965-1981; The Holiday 1966-2007; The Tender Trap 1967-1985)

1970

Lucky opens the House of Tilden.

1975

Governor Milton Shapp issues an Executive Order 1975-5, prohibiting employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in state government. Every Governor since has renewed his Executive Order, except Governor Tom Corbett.

1980

Traveler's Club opens. The third of Lucky's clubs, Traveler's is part of a growing resource of cultural activities and venues that are used by the region's LGBT population. By the 1980's, many of the other clubs such as the Norreh Club on Polish Hill or the Holiday Bar in Oakland are run by colleagues or former employees of Lucky's, establishing a network of gay bars. The bars help establish a series of social services for the LGBT community, including the Persad Center, the Shepherd Wellness Center, and the Delta and Lambda Foundations. Bars become centers of community-wide education and prevention efforts during the AIDS crisis, helping organizations like the Pitt Men's Study recruit clinical subjects and disseminate information.

1987

Enforcement of the PA Liquor Code transfers from local authorities to the Bureau of Liquor Control Enforcement with the Pennsylvania State Police. Concurrently, local authorities begin to regulate after-hours clubs and 'blind pigs' more stringently.

1988

The Valentine Day's Raid. State Liquor Control agents raid the Traveler's Club on February 14, citing consumption of alcohol by minors and serving liquor after-hours. Those who are arrested or physically assaulted during the raid begin legal proceedings against the State Police and renew lobbying efforts on behalf of LGBT members in the community.

1990

Mayor Sophie Masloff signs the city's first Gay Rights Ordinance in March

Integrity worthy of preservation or restoration

- ▶ 1967: Robert “Lucky” Johns opens T.C., or Transportation Club, the first gay club to utilize Pittsburgh’s social club charter system which issues liquor licenses to clubs, permitting them to serve drinks to dues-paying members after hours, likely with both mafia and police protection/connections.
- ▶ With a network of relationships from working in nightlife, Lucky staffs The Holiday and TC, then opening the House of Tilden and Travelers. Many who work for/with Lucky go on to open their own bars and to become members of the Tavern Guild (early 1980s). These people include Donald Thinnes (of Donny’s) and Joyce McIntyre (of Players 430 in Homestead, anchor lesbian bar 1982-1984, later Players Loft at Zak’s Fourth Avenue downtown).
- ▶ The Norreh/Donny’s was the first non-Lucky’s owned gay after-hours club in Pittsburgh. Lucky’s in the Strip (owned by Nancy Pribich) is the only original Tavern Guild establishment still remaining

Integrity worthy of preservation or restoration

- ▶ Gay and lesbian bars are being lost all over the country: in the 1980s, there were around 200 lesbian bars, and only 28 by 2023; more than 45% of gay bars closed between 2002 and 2023.
- ▶ This is for many reasons:
 - ▶ Continued homophobia and transphobia (this remains very relevant as especially vitriolic transphobia is rising all over the country)
 - ▶ Conversely, there has also been broader acceptance that makes bars less of a necessary safe haven for some OR they are not very welcoming to younger queer, genderqueer or trans people
 - ▶ These numbers never totally recovered from pre-height of the HIV/AIDS pandemic
 - ▶ Presently, there are less bars in general because of the COVID pandemic (especially for people with less social and financial capital like women, gay, and trans people) and online dating's popularity
 - ▶ Gentrification





























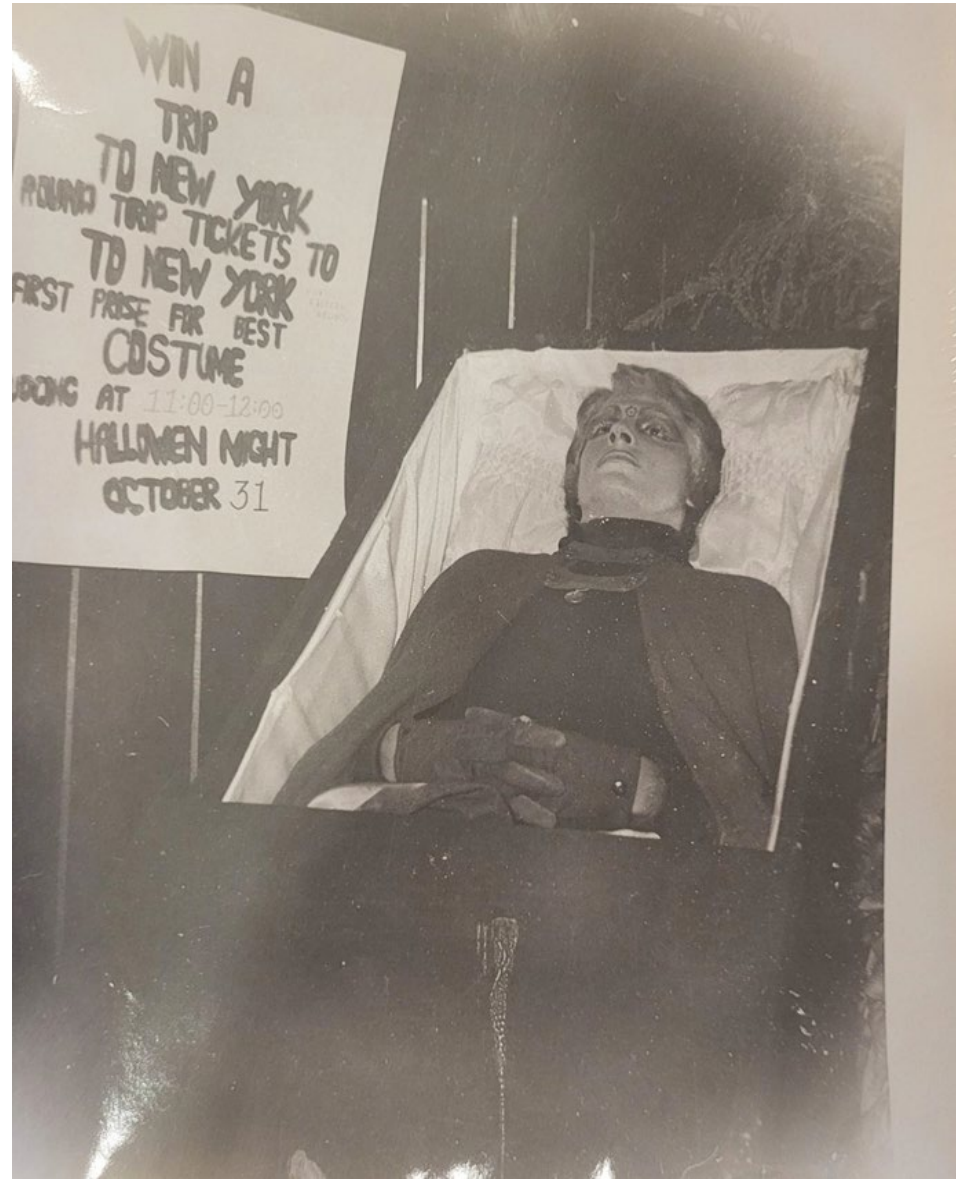






















Thank You