For many years, Steubenville, Ohio was a thriving center of the steel industry. Within this city, a robust Jewish community flourished as well. And within that community, Temple Beth Israel was the center of Jewish religious, cultural and social life.

"They started steel mills and manufacturing and then the Jewish people came to supplement, with clothing stores and grocery stores, the needs of the people.”

—Beverly Greenburg

Today the picture is very different. When the steel mills began to close in the 1980s, the city felt its brunt. Steubenville decreased from a city of 40,000 to one of 18,000 today. “There was no reason for our children to return to the community” said Dottie Silberman. "And none did. High holidays this year, we peaked at maybe 20 people.”

So, facing a bleak economy, and an aging congregation, Temple Beth Israel turned to the Jewish Community Legacy Project (JCLP) for assistance in determining how to manage changing demographics while still sustaining a Jewish presence.

“Even though a community is declining, they’re not giving up on Jewish life,” said JCLP president David Sarnat. JCLP helped Temple Beth Israel make plans for transition and helped turn what could have been a sorrowful circumstance into a blessing. After gathering one more time for a service last Yom Kippur, the temple building was sold. Part of the Beth Israel legacy will be a much-needed senior community center that will stand where the Temple once stood. With the proceeds from the sale, Beth Israel is working with the Jewish Federation of
Greater Pittsburgh to be part of the Fund for the Future, which will endow programs to further the Jewish identity of area youth.

A Union for Reform Judaism (URJ)–affiliated congregation, Temple Beth Israel was given historic status so that it remains a part of the Reform Movement in perpetuity.

Beth Israel’s new home is now 30 miles from Steubenville at Pittsburgh’s Beth El Congregation, which is affiliated with United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism (USJC). JCLP helped facilitate the partnership, which offers not only a place of worship, but also is designating a special room within the temple to house Beth Israel artifacts and ritual objects. Beth Israel’s biblical sculptures have been donated to nearby URJ Congregation Rodef Shalom.

“Congregations can leave a legacy that continues the work they were doing,” said Sarnat. “Even if a community at some point ceases to function in a traditional sense, whatever assets they have can continue to be of service and enrich Jewish life.

The Marcus Foundation has funded the Jewish Community Legacy Project since its inception in 2008. URJ now seeks to ensure that the Legacy Project itself has a future. To that end, URJ will serve as administrative partner beginning in mid-2014. Interested individuals and communities should contact David Sarnat at (770) 690–8230, david@jclproject.org, Noah Levine at (678) 429–8895, noah@jclproject.org or Merry Lugasy, (212) 452.6742, mlugasy@urj.org.