

Monday, December 13, 2010

LM's CIP heads to final vote Wednesday

By Cheryl Allison

Despite questions about the timing and scope of some projects in difficult economic times, Lower Merion commissioners last week tentatively approved a \$157-million Capital Improvement Program for 2011-2016 virtually intact.

The new five-year plan for major township projects, along with a new 2011 operating budget, goes to a final vote Dec. 15.

The Finance Committee discussion devoted to the CIP Dec. 8 was a late addition to the budget process, made when there were complaints the previous week from both community members and some commissioners that the plan, which includes \$28 million in projects scheduled for 2011, was about to move forward with little comment in a post-midnight vote.

In fact, in the two-hour discussion, the capital budget received more board and public comment than in any recent year.

It focused on three major projects proposed to move forward in 2011: construction of Phase 1 of the Cynwyd Heritage Trail rail-to-trail project, a streetscape-improvement project for Bala Avenue, and renovation and expansion of the Bala Cynwyd Library as the next project in a systematic program of library upgrades.

Cynwyd Heritage Trail

After a close vote the previous week on over-budget construction bids, trail volunteers turned out in force in green "Friends of" T-shirts, worried that board support for the popular project might be slipping.

They were there to reinforce the message that it would be shortsighted and likely more expensive in the long run to scale

back a trail design that calls for separate paved and gravel paths geared to faster bicycle and rollerblade use and more leisurely walking use.

"This is exactly the type of exercise the township should be involved in," said trail neighbor Drew Reese. With a majority of trail funding coming from grant sources, it is a project, Reese said, that, "at nominal cost [to the township] creates a sense of community, but is available to the township at large. Reese and others said development of the trail could also provide a substantial boost to revitalization in the nearby Bala Avenue business district.

With the trail and some other new projects, Audrey Romasco of Bryn Mawr cautioned, however, the township needs to be mindful both of ongoing costs and of the pressure of rising taxes to pay for them.

Commissioner Scott Zelov, who chairs the board's Parks and Recreation Committee, said he supports the trail project but reminded his colleagues and the audience that a principle from the beginning has been to keep it within the budget.

In what turned out to be one of the very few successful motions to alter the capital-spending plan, Zelov proposed a switch: shifting the township's request for some remaining Montgomery County open-space funds from a project to create a new pocket park on a property on Highland Avenue in Belmont Hills to the trail project.

The county has made it clear it does not favor open-space money for the Belmont Hills project but might be more favorable to increasing support for the trail, Zelov said. If so, the shift might largely balance out the \$259,000 extra cost for trail construction.

In a companion motion, Commissioner Paul McElhaney, who represents Belmont Hills, proposed a way to still provide funding for the Highland Avenue project, which he said would serve several important functions in that community. The board also supported his request to direct proceeds from the anticipated sale of the township-owned Smith Cottage near the Belmont Hills pool to the Highland Avenue project.

Bala Avenue streetscape improvements

First introduced in the 2009 CIP, a project to enhance the Bala Avenue streetscape and promote pedestrian safety has been the subject of new scrutiny in recent weeks. The \$1.6-million project includes installing new streetlights, traffic-calming measures such as "bump-outs" at intersections and crosswalks, and new street trees and other landscaping.

To be paid for largely with grant funds from the City Avenue Special Services District, the project can be divided into two components: the new lighting that accounts for \$900,000 of the cost, and the other improvements, which represent about 40 percent of the project. The township is to contribute \$450,000 of the total project costs.

In detailed memos to the board, Carl Watson, a Shortridge resident who is a professional lighting engineer, has suggested that project planners take a new look at the lighting part while making the other improvements.

That part of the project calls for installing 69 new decorative poles and streetlamps at a height of 16 feet. Watson has noted that some 23 cobra-head lighting fixtures attached to utility poles were installed in recent years, and could be upgraded to provide better road lighting for as low as

\$10,000.

In comments last week, however, John Grogan, a vice president of the Neighborhood Club of Bala Cynwyd, said the project is one that “has manifest merit.” On Bala Avenue today, sidewalks are narrow, cars speed by, the lighting is poor, and signage and other visual aspects should be improved, he said.

Sue McKee, a business owner, said the improvements “will encourage new retail [businesses] and allow existing retailers to stay” on Bala Avenue. “After 15 years we have a vehicle in place and funding in place to revitalize Bala Avenue,” she added, saying that if it delays or alters the project, the township stands to lose the grant funds.

Others said the purpose of the new streetlamps is to improve lighting and safety at the sidewalk level as well as to create a more inviting village atmosphere.

Commissioner Cheryl Gelber had a different concern, noting that the proposal calls for spending considerably more on the Bala Avenue lighting than on badly needed stormwater-management projects. The township’s priorities, she suggested, “seem a little goofy.” No motions to amend the project were successful, however.

Bala Cynwyd Library improvements

There has been recurring discussion in the

township over the past year about which library renovation should follow the current \$9-million Ludington Library renovation and expansion in a \$25-million program to upgrade all six branches in the Lower Merion Library System. Should it be Bala Cynwyd, the next most expensive at about \$8 million, or some smaller project?

Penn Wynne resident Chuck Scott commented last week that, in answers to recent budget questions, township manager Douglas Cleland had estimated the additional cost to expand Bala Cynwyd Library – apart from needed renovation – at \$3 million to \$4 million. That is “just about the shortfall,” Scott observed, between the \$2 million that has been raised so far in a library-system capital campaign and its goal of \$5 million or more.

Scott suggested an alternative strategy: move Bala Cynwyd to the end, do necessary renovations at other libraries, and “then, if donations pick up, we can not only do renovations at Bala Cynwyd but expansion.”

Commissioner Phil Rosenzweig made a motion to move the Bala project back to 2013 but it failed with only Zelov and Gelber joining him in favor. There was some talk also about splitting the project and doing just renovation.

Not only are the renovation and expansion tied together, however, but Commissioner

George Manos, who chairs the Libraries Committee, suggested that pushing the project back might derail the private fundraising efforts. On that point, Cleland noted, the township had just got a check from the Lower Merion Library Foundation for the first installment of \$400,000 in donations.

Cleland also said the board will hear a report on an independent cost estimate for the Bala Cynwyd Library in February.

In general comments, board Vice President Mark Taylor, who made the motion to recommend approval of the 2011-2016 Capital Improvement Program, urged colleagues to remember that they were voting on the document in total and not on individual projects that night.

Board President Bruce Reed also wanted to take a broader view. In what he would likely term a “philosophical difference” with some commissioners, he proposed that the CIP is “an aspirational document,” a long-term plan for investment in township infrastructure and facilities.

Zelov, however, responded that it is “more than an aspirational document, because what we [plan] for 2011 is a commitment. The staff work is under way.”

“We need this discussion,” Zelov said, “and if there are changes to make, the sooner the better.”