

Main Line Times

Thursday, September 30, 2010

Workshop sessions focus on City Avenue rezoning

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The discussions on Lower Merion Township's proposed City Avenue rezoning continued this week, in a less formal, more interactive setting than a public hearing just seven days earlier.

Leaving aside the controversial issue of the inclusion of Bala Avenue for now, the workshop session Monday night focused on some initial proposed revisions to a rezoning ordinance, and on the topic of incentives for increased density of development.

Building and Planning Director Bob Duncan said that, based on feedback from previous meetings, some revised provisions have already been suggested.

While many are minor changes, one could put community residents and owners of larger commercial properties at odds.

The rezoning generally aims to provide opportunities for revitalization and redevelopment in the township's prime office and commercial area by encouraging mixed-use, more pedestrian-oriented development. It also would permit greater density of development and greater building height in some

areas, focusing the most significant potential changes closest to City Avenue.

Duncan said that, to provide more of a transition in areas abutting residential neighborhoods, one of the most significant revisions is directed toward two areas, one along St. Asaph's Road behind the Bala Cynwyd Shopping Center and the other along the east side of Belmont Avenue from St. Asaph's Road to Righters Ferry Road.

On those parcels, the revised language would dictate the type and height of development for certain distances extending back from the street.

No development would be permitted in the first 50 feet back from the curb line, while residential development only, with a height limit of 45 feet, would be permitted in the next 50 feet.

To attain a "wedding-cake effect," development to a height of 65 feet could occur between 100 and 150 feet from the curb line. Beyond 150 feet, development could reach 120 feet.

While the intent is to have a greater buffer for residents across the street, representatives of the two large commercial parcels affected said they saw the greater setback and development restrictions as downzoning parts of their properties.

"It's extremely limiting from my point of view," said David Joss, development manager of Federal

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Federal Realty Investment Trust, owners of the Bala Cynwyd Shopping Center.

Janet Giuliani, a senior director with Tishman Speyer, owner of One Bala Plaza on Belmont Avenue, said she had a "similar concern" to Joss's, also seeing the change as downzoning.

Duncan pointed out that the setback change is actually fairly minimal compared to existing zoning. He also noted that the increased maximum height of 120 feet on a large part of the properties is a gain for property owners and could be seen as a trade-off for the larger buffer area.

But Joss pointed to the example of the townhouses that Main Line Health Realty is building on Pennsylvania Avenue near Bryn Mawr Hospital. Those homes are closer to the street and screen the view of the hospital's new parking garage.

It might make more sense, he suggested, to be able to build residential development closer to St. Asaph's Road to "wrap" a parking structure that might be built at the shopping center.

Bala Cynwyd residents who have taken part in the discussions have suggested that any taller buildings should be more interior to the site, closer to City Avenue.

Introducing another topic, Bala Cynwyd Commissioner George Manos said he wanted to discuss potential development incentives of increased height or density. "I'm hoping we can agree on what incentives are priorities," he said.

For example, if the community puts the greatest value on seeing new public gathering spaces incorporated into development, should that get the greatest density bonus?

Manos did not get the consensus on a priority list that he was seeking from the 30 or so residents, property owners and others who participated in the workshop.

What he did get, however, was an expanded list of items for which the township might want to consider giving development incentives to help steer development in a desired direction.

Any incentives also should be balanced against the potential cost to developers, it was suggested; that is, if a particular item is too expensive, it

probably never would be built.

The ordinance lists four potential categories of incentives for:

- Providing public gathering space.
- Developing mixed-use buildings.
- Building underground or wrapped parking structures.
- Incorporating affordable housing.

Other categories suggested included incentives for developers who contribute toward the expense of offsite traffic improvements; contributions for more fire services, if needed, to respond to new development; sustainable design; and improvements to provide increased or better integrated access to public transportation.

In other news from the workshop, Duncan said planning staff is working on an expanded timetable for meetings, extending perhaps through next June. The meetings generally would be scheduled monthly, alternating between the more informal workshops and continued public hearings on the City Avenue ordinance.

The next scheduled meeting is a public hearing on Oct. 25 at 6:30 p.m. at the Township Building.