

MAIN LINE TIMES

Thursday, February 24, 2011

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Bala Cynwyd Taco Bell's preliminary plan OK'd

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There was no getting around it.

After a week's delay to work out differences on the plan for a Taco Bell in Bala Cynwyd, the major obstacle was still a proposed bypass lane for the new fast-food outlet's drive-thru lane.

Lower Merion Township's planning staff and planning commission had argued for alternatives to drop the extra pavement and provide more green space on a one-acre parcel at Conshohocken State Road and City Avenue, where a second, unspecified retail/commercial building is also planned.

In the end, the board of commissioners, meeting Feb. 16, chose function over form on what some see as a gateway corner in the township. It voted to approve a preliminary plan of land development for the site that includes the bypass lane.

"It's a delicate balance," commented Commissioner George Manos, who represents the area. While a fast-food restaurant with drive-thru may not fit the vision of an ongoing effort for revitalization of the City Avenue corridor – something planners were keeping in mind – Manos said the reality is that the proposed use is "a high-traffic operation."

"The parts of it that make it successful also ought to be respected," he said. On balance, "I have to come down on the functional side."

The board's Building and Planning Committee had tabled the application Feb. 9 to see if a list of disputed conditions of approval could be narrowed.

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Among the remaining items, the bypass lane – an "escape lane" that would allow drivers/diners who changed their minds or didn't want to wait to get out of line – and an area at the corner intended to serve as a landscaped gateway feature were the most debated.

At the previous meeting, the property owners had reluctantly said they could do without the bypass lane, but last week attorney George Broseman, representing Jim and Celeste Nasuti of Bryn Mawr, said, as operators of more than 70 of the restaurants, they "see a benefit" in the bypass.

They were also opposed to a

planning-commission recommendation to remove two or three proposed parking spaces to enlarge the landscaped area at the corner, Broseman said.

They also wanted less restrictive language calling for the architecture of the future second building and the landscaping plan to take cues from the still evolving standards of City Avenue rezoning.

Commissioners agreed the site, as developed under this plan, would be an improvement over its previous condition. A gas-station site for more than 60 years, its former owner, Lukoil, has demolished old structures and is remediating contamination.

Commissioner Phil Rosenzweig noted that the Taco Bell plan "will bring vitality and commerce to a challenged site."

In the vote, commissioners heavily favored the bypass plan and some other items requested by the applicants, although Commissioner Brian Gordon wanted his colleagues to take note that they were, in effect, dismissing many of the recommendations offered by the planning commission.

Board President Liz Rogan, who had noted that she was "disappointed" by the development plan – "this was not quite my vision" for the site, she said – said that didn't mean the board wasn't

listening to the planners' advice. "It means we were not in agreement," she said.