Board OKs RFPs for City Ave. traffic study

By Cheryl Allison

The Lower Merion Board of Commissioners voted last week to adopt an advisory committee's report that tries to predict development in the City Avenue corridor over the next 20 years, a requisite step if the township eventually wants to assess traffic-impact fees.

It also decided, however, to take things a little slower on the next step in the process, putting on pause hiring a consultant to perform a traffic study initially priced at nearly $100,000.

Referred to as a land-use assumptions report, the document was developed by the City Avenue Transportation Services Area Advisory Committee, a committee made up of representatives of the City Avenue Special Services District, commercial-property owners and area civic associations.

Over the past several months, the TSAAC has been working separately from but somewhat in parallel with consideration of a zoning-ordinance amendment that would permit a different pattern of development in the corridor. The proposed rezoning emphasizes mixed-use buildings and more pedestrian-oriented streetscapes, but also significantly greater density. In a few instances it would allow building heights up to 300 feet.

The purpose of the TSAAC process is to determine the feasibility of designating a transportation-services area, like one established a decade ago for the Rock Hill Road/Belmont Avenue corridor, also in Bala Cynwyd. In a TSA, a municipality may impose impact fees of up to 50 percent on

share of needed roadway and intersection improvements.

The land-use assumptions report, or LUAR, is the first of three steps. As adopted, it would be used as the basis for a comprehensive traffic study — a "roadway-sufficiency analysis" — which would in turn be used to develop a plan of capital-improvement projects.

To produce the LUAR, the City Avenue committee looked at current land-development applications and interviewed major landowners about their plans. It also considered provisions of the proposed zoning amendment, particularly the additional density it would allow.

It was one of the fundamental assumptions of the report that, even if the ordinance were to be adopted as it is currently drafted, properties would not be developed to the maximum permitted.

It makes predictions of new development and redevelopment in five-year increments, assuming that over the full 20 years, about 50 percent of the maximum would be built.

Even so, the LUAR projects some 3.6 million square feet of additional residential, retail and office space may be developed, about double what exists today. As Roger Moog, a TSAAC member representing the Neighborhood Club of Bala Cynwyd, put it, that's "a pretty scary proposition."

In public comments, two general concerns have been raised.

First, area residents have cautioned

that many roads and intersections in the study area are already at "traffic overload" and have urged the township to broaden any traffic analysis to include the many streets and roads that feed traffic into and through the area.

Second, some residents have urged the township not to include the Bala Avenue shopping district in the rezoning and, by extension, the land-use assumptions. At the board meeting Aug. 4, Bala Avenue resident Barry Polis presented a petition to that effect signed by 190 residents.

Board members had some questions of their own.

Commissioners Phil Rosenzweig noted that the board more typically "receives" or "accepts" a study or report, and wondered what different meaning it might carry to "adopt" the LUAR. Specifically, "does it obligate this board to spend

anything?" he wanted to know.

For pursuit of a transportation-services area designation, he was told, the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code requires a resolution to adopt an LUAR.

It was the answer to Rosenzweig's follow-up question that prompted the board to put the next step — the traffic analysis — on pause.

On the agenda immediately after adopting the LUAR was a staff recommendation to hire for $90,000 Pennoni Associates, the township engineer, to both perform the roadway-sufficiency analysis and create a capital-improvement plan for a City Avenue transportation-service area. Commissioner Scott Zelov asked why a contract to perform the work wasn't being competitively bid.

Building and Planning Director Bob Duncan explained that Pennoni knows the area and has already gotten much of the data that would be used in performing an analysis, including traffic counts that have been submitted in connection with recent or current development plans in the area. Bringing in and bringing up to speed a third party might cost more, he said.

"Your assumptions may be correct, but there's one way to find out," Zelov responded; that is, by putting out a request for proposals from traffic consultants.

Writing an RFP and seeking responses would likely take two to three months, delaying the TSA process by that long, Duncan said. He pointed out that, in adopting a TSA, the township would have a certain "reach-back" period, during which it would be able to impose impact fees on some development applications that had already been submitted; that reach-back period would necessarily shift by a few months.

Public comment on the proposal took two tacks. Polis questioned the need for an expensive study. "All you have to do is take a drive down City Avenue at 5 p.m. It's already on overload," he said.

On the other hand, if a study is done, the township "should be concerned about the objectivity of the whole process," remarked Moog, a transportation engineer by profession. "It's unconscionable to me that this would not be bid. It smacks of a fix, a fix of conclusions," he said, adding, "That's the last thing this board wants to have about this process."

Although board President Bruce Reed said it will be "almost excruciating to the community to have this hanging as a sword of Damocles" for even longer, he seconded Zelov's motion to issue a request for proposals for the traffic analysis.

The board vote was unanimous in favor.