

Thursday, January 13, 2011

Bruce Reed's retirement speech

Remarks of Bruce D. Reed

President of the Lower Merion Township Board of Commissioners

Commissioner for Ward 13 (Cynwyd and Merion Park)

January 12, 2011

The instructions to young physicians from Hippocrates in his writings entitled "Epidemics" included the injunction to "do no harm." That is an instruction which, I believe, has resonance with regard to our role as Commissioners of Lower Merion Township.

The overwhelming sentiment of our residents, whether measured through such means as surveys, by interactions with our civic associations, or our individual conversations with our constituents, is that the character of Lower Merion which we have collectively known and loved should be maintained. Continuity is seen as a virtue, and well it might be, for we live in a remarkable community.

While municipalities across this country are wrestling with the effects of these bleak economic times, Lower Merion continues to enjoy fiscal strength, as exemplified by the continued reconfirmation of the Triple A bond rating by the two rating agencies. It is an aesthetically beautiful community, both in its natural and man-made environment. The Township government continues to offer a range of services which contribute to the quality of life enjoyed by our residents, which has a corresponding effect not only on our daily lives (as measured in such factors as security, convenience and utility), but also on the property values of what for most of us is our most important asset – our homes.

But we don't live in a static world, and stasis in the face of change can lead to decline. A singular example is the course of future development. Though Lower Merion is a built-out community, redevelopment occurs and will occur, and the manner in which that proceeds is important for the future character of Lower Merion. The work being done on revising the zoning for City Avenue and Bala Avenue at the eastern edge of our township recognizes that the existing zoning neither provides protection against certain potential negative effects of future development, nor incentives for the type of development which would be complementary to the adjoining community. In the absence of careful revision, we face the prospect not only of undesirable change, but also of a missed opportunity to foster change which would enhance rather than degrade that community. In recognition of that fact, the Township has undertaken an important role, and conducted a series of studies, hearings and workshops which have and will stretch over years before a new zoning ordinance will eventually emerge from what I hope will be a collective consensus as to how to proceed.

Change may also come by the slow but steady effect of the passage of time. Our township's infrastructure, ranging from the beautiful, such as our parks, the mundane essential, such as our roadways and stormwater sewer system, to the instructional and intellectual resources, such as our libraries, must be properly maintained in order to allow them to operate efficiently. Deferred maintenance is one of the hidden threats to stewardship of these Township resources, and represents a false economy, as its effect on the future is disproportionately greater than if issues are dealt with in a timely, planned and orderly fashion. That is a matter of simple prudence. But that same prudence counsels that we should be aware of optimal opportunities to invest in those resources, so they have value not only in the present but for the future as well. An example in this regard is what we have done in recent years with our investment in our libraries and parks. At a time when both construction costs and interest rates are each at historic lows, we have an opportunity to invest in long-term capital assets that will add value to our community for decades and decades. And once again, not only will our residents be able to enjoy the daily benefits of, for instance, an expanded Ludington Library (corresponding to the increase in use which our libraries are enjoying, even in this digital age), and the recreational benefits of a Cynwyd Trail which will emerge before the end of this year, but we will have invested our tax dollars in tangible assets which will in turn enhance our property values.

I want to reflect for a moment on what we, as a Board, have been able to accomplish during the past seven years that I've been a member of this Board.

- Preservation of the overall character of Lower Merion.
- Retention of the double Triple A bond rating and continuation of the fiscal policies which undergird that rating.
- Continued quality of bipartisan appointments to the boards and commissioners of the Township.
- Creation of the Linwood Avenue Park.
- Creation of the Cynwyd Trail.
- Passage of the anti-discrimination ordinance.
- Renovation and expansion of Ludington Library
- Renovation of the Belmont Hills and Ardmore swimming pools.
- Extensive planting of shade trees throughout the Township.
- Expansion of the Township's historic districts.
- Stabilization and substantial renovation of the Cynwyd Train Station.
- Passage of the Bryn Mawr Master Plan, to encourage appropriate and sympathetic future development of Bryn Mawr.

I do, of course, have regrets with regard to some of the issues which came before us during those same seven years.

- The loss of La Ronda, a significant part of the architectural heritage of this Township.
- Efforts to revitalize Ardmore have been protracted, and made more difficult by the malaise in the real estate market.
- We continue to rely, as a primary source of revenue, on the real estate tax, an inherently regressive tax which falls most heavily on residents on fixed incomes.
- The 7% reduction in the Township staff in recent years, which I worry has, or will, affect the quality of the Township's services.

I hope this Board will address those, and other issues, and move to meet the challenges of the coming years in a way which will allow our community to retain and enhance the character which makes it uniquely Lower Merion.

But I am troubled by a threat which is entirely man-made, and hopefully within our ability, if not to control, at least to avoid. This past weekend's tragedy in Arizona vividly illustrates the danger of what I fear is a correlation between inflamed political rhetoric, including the denunciation and demonization of one's political opponents, and effects, including violence, which can stem from such a culture of confrontation. While the natural reaction is to take comfort that no such violent event has happened in Lower Merion, it is disturbing to note that we are ourselves hardly exempt from one of the evident bases for the occurrence of such violence – the decline in the nature of public debate and discussion

My involvement in civic matters in this township stretches back over 20 years, starting with my participation as a member of the Board of Directors of The Neighborhood Club of Bala Cynwyd. I began working on the Township level as a member of the Planning Commission a decade ago. One of the reasons for my involvement, first in my civic association, and then in Township government, was what I observed of the very direct effect on daily life of the Township and its government. I valued what I saw, and wanted to help contribute as I could. One of the most striking aspects of what I saw was the almost total absence of partisan rancor or personal animosity. In marked contrast to what pertained elsewhere, including in Harrisburg and Washington, where personal ambition and political expediency then and now seemed to hold sway, Lower Merion was a beacon of enlightened discussion and consensus. And all of us were the better for it.

When I ran for the office of Commissioner, I was fortunate to have the nomination of both political parties, as was the case again for my re-election. And the Board I joined reflected a level of cooperation and consensus among its members, regardless of party identity or any other factor. Discussions and decisions demonstrated what I felt to be a shared commitment to the good of the township as a whole, and a recognition of the pursuit of the common good. I admired and enjoyed my colleagues, which included several who had provided long and distinguished leadership during their tenures.

Yet, there were factors external to the Board which threatened that dynamic. The hearings involving proposals for Ardmore redevelopment, and the expansion of Lankenau Hospital involved inflamed and often nasty language hurled by speakers at hearings and meetings. The televising of meetings, which had begun several years before, seemed to invite vitriolic speech by some who enjoyed the notoriety it afforded them. Television doesn't distinguish between the temperate and the intemperate, but provides exposure to both, and perhaps, sadly, disproportionate encouragement to the latter. So too the Internet, which has proven to provide a platform for some whose writings can be negative, inaccurate, or simply juvenile, a situation exacerbated by the anonymity behind which some choose to hide. Constructive public debate is furthered by having those who participate do so in their own names.

The election of 2005 saw the retirement of five of the long-standing members of the Board, and their replacements seemed to approach their duties with a different perspective. Of the five new members who joined this Board after that election, from both political parties, four have now either sought, or indicated their intention to seek, higher office. Over the history of this Board, few of its members have either sought, or achieved, higher political office. While personal ambition is not itself a problem, the absence of such ambition has, I believe, the beneficial effect of encouraging more detached decision-making. The dynamic on the Board was changing, and unfortunately, I felt it was for the worse. The motivations and actions not only of the Board of that day, but also those of its predecessors, were, at times, spoken of contemptuously or derided.

When I subsequently became President of this Board over four years ago, I recognized that trend, and closed my remarks on that first evening by noting that I hoped that civil discourse would indeed be civil discourse. I'm afraid that hope has not always been realized. Instead, this Board has progressively become engulfed in a level of acrimony which is unbecoming and counter-productive. And while discussion, debate and reasoned disagreement are a part of democracy, the deriding of opponents, or their motivations, should not be. It is bad enough that this dynamic should exist among members of the Board, but it is worse when it begins to be directed at the institution of this Township, and the staff which so capably serves it.

One of the fundamental reasons we enjoy the quality of government and the quality of life we do today is because of the capability and dedication of our Township staff. Whether it be the highway crews who clear our streets of snow as recently as this morning, the police who keep us safe, the building and planning staff and inspectors who insure compliance with the laws and standards of the Township, or the crews who collect our refuse and recycling, the work of these people touches us directly every day. Remarkable individuals come to mind from all levels of the Township family, such as Eileen Trainer, Pat Ryan and Bob Duncan, and others too numerous to mention, but whose work touches us every day. And the quality of the staff, and of the services they deliver is directly reflective of the quality of their leadership, as exemplified by our Township Manager, Doug Cleland. Simply put, there are few managers, either in the public or the private sectors, who can equal what we have in Mr. Cleland, or his demonstrated level of accomplishment for this Township and its people. It has been my pleasure and honor to work with him, and I commend him as a man who puts the public good at the forefront of everything he does, and approaches each issue with a neutrality which is exemplary. He is the epitome of a true public servant.

That brings me to the matter of the interplay of this Board with the Township staff. Among the essential purposes of the staff is to provide information to allow the Commissioners to make informed policy decisions. I believe that the ability of the staff to do so, and to exercise the necessary degrees of creativity and capability, is damaged when their motives and neutrality are unnecessarily and unfairly assailed. The staff works for the good of all of the residents of this Township, and we all lose when their integrity or the independence of their judgment is unfairly questioned or criticized. Each of us may at times disagree with what Doug Cleland or other members of the staff might advise as to a particular course of action, but I think it is a complete disservice to him to question their neutrality. I implore this Board to conduct its future discussions of policy in a manner which doesn't make the staff the objects of its disagreements.

I'd like to thank the residents of Cynwyd and Merion Park for affording me the privilege of being their Commissioner for the past seven years. Tonight will be the last in which I speak from this dais, as a member of this Board. I will, thereafter, like all the other residents of this Township, look to this Board to administer the affairs of our Township wisely and capably. We are all the transitory stewards of the great legacy which has been handed down to us by our predecessors. I wish this Board well in the discharge of its duties in furthering that legacy, and hope that all of us, when we each conclude our service on this Board, can look back and feel we were worthy of this Township and of ourselves.