

MAIN LINE TIMES

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MAIN LINE TIMES/MainLineMediaNews.com

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Building height and traffic divisive issues for City Avenue

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After months of discussion, a proposed ordinance to craft new zoning for the City Avenue corridor has been modified in many ways to strike a balance between opportunities for revitalization and protections for existing neighborhoods in Merion and Bala Cynwyd.

Those changes drew little direct comment in the latest public hearing on the initiative Tuesday night in Lower Merion, however.

Instead the focus was on two fundamental issues that continue to divide participants in the process: traffic and building height.

The comments on traffic were a carryover, apparently, from a meeting Monday of a separate but related committee charged potentially with setting impact fees for transportation improvements to be paid by developers of properties in the study area.

That group, the City Avenue Transportation Services Area Advisory Committee, in recent days has received a report and recommendations from a traffic study of current and projected traffic conditions in the corridor.

The report, which has not been finalized, has not yet been presented in a more public forum.

Its findings were of enough concern to some Bala Cynwyd residents who sit on the committee, however, that they spoke out Tuesday night to caution the small group of township commissioners who were conducting the hearing.

"Although we have spent a lot of time on the specifics of zoning, what became very apparent from the traffic report is the impact [redevelopment] would have on intersections and traffic flow and

Building height, traffic sticking points for City Ave.

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hence the community," said David Haas, a representative of the Neighborhood Club of Bala Cynwyd who serves on the TSAAC.

Essentially, Haas said, "we learned that without any development in the district, based solely on background development elsewhere and the prospect of [poorly functioning] intersections getting worse, ... it is obvious there is much to be done by the township, the state and the federal government to alleviate traffic before any additional development occurs."

"We now know what we suspected," Haas said. "There has to be a full-court press" for improvements – and a capital budget to pay for them – "before we start talking about increased density."

Haas called those current conditions of traffic congestion "the 800-pound gorilla in the room" that will "make or break the success of zoning."

He said commissioners should call on the township to investigate, in addition to incentives for increased density, some program to encourage developers to contribute to improving current problems.

In saying that, he carefully noted that the TSAAC, a component of establishing a Transportation Services Area for the City Avenue corridor, is strictly limited by the state law that governs the process to setting impact fees for new development.

It is the same process Lower Merion Township followed nearly a decade ago for the Rock Hill Road/Belmont Avenue corridor, where planned development – along with road improvements – has failed to materialize.

While Haas's concerns were echoed by some other Bala Cynwyd residents, other TSAAC members who have seen the traffic study suggested the alarm may be premature.

"I'm a little surprised and taken aback," said Richard Gottlieb, who represents a commercial-property owner. Gottlieb said it was important to remember that the Transportation Services Area process is the mechanism that makes possible any assessment of impact fees.

"The reality is, if nothing happens" to change zoning and trigger the TSA process, "there will be no improvements," Gottlieb said. Traffic "will get worse naturally."

On the other hand, with the type of mixed-use development considered in rezoning, in which different patterns of use other than morning and evening rush hour could be seen, "I think the traffic actually will be helped," he said.

Gary Brandeis, another representative of a commercial-property owner and township resident, also pointed out that the changes seen for City Avenue will play out over time, while roads can be improved. "It seems like the public has this vision that as soon as we pass this zoning, ... we're going to have 300-foot buildings within two weeks of it passing," Brandeis said, but "the longer we neglect the Bala Cynwyd submarket on the retail and office side, unfortunately it's going to make traffic conditions worse."

"Ultimately," Brandeis said, "the do-nothing attitude frankly is not acceptable to me as a resident of this township who wants to see the township flourish over time and stop losing businesses to Conshohocken, Radnor and Tredyffrin Township."

The comments Gottlieb and Brandeis made regarding the role the City Avenue corridor plays as a commercial support to Lower Merion's suburban lifestyle touched on the other most controversial issue in the rezoning discussion. The ordinance, in its current form, would still allow a limited number of much taller buildings than exist today.

Martin Piltsch, a representative of the Merion Civic Association on the TSAAC, reiterated his belief that even those few opportunities may be too many.

"Lower Merion is a bedroom community. There is no justification for 200- to 300-foot-tall buildings, regardless of what may be on the other side of City Avenue" in Philadelphia, Piltsch suggested. He urged commissioners, if they permit such height at all, to limit it to the area east of Presidential Boulevard to the Schuylkill River.

One of the major revisions since the rezoning discussion started last year has been the proposal for a separate Retail Center District primarily encompassing the Bala Cynwyd Shopping Center. Splitting that area off from a larger Regional Center District – and reducing the maximum building height from 120 to 90 feet – has been in response to residents' concerns about retaining retail uses to serve nearby neighborhoods.

As Tuesday's hearing, however, a representative of Federal Realty Investment Trust, which owns the shopping center, again objected to the restriction.

Dave Joss, a vice president of Federal Realty, pointed out that an adjoining condominium building and the nearby GSB office building are taller. A "rhythm and tone" for that part of City Avenue have already been established at 120 feet, Joss said, adding that permitting taller buildings will also make it possible to set aside "more usable open space" or public areas. "We feel we should keep that building language," he said.

In comments on what she had heard, board of commissioners President Liz Rogan repeated the board's pledge that it "couldn't act on a zoning ordinance until we understood what was happening" in terms of traffic conditions. That was one reason the board ordered a traffic study that goes beyond the strict limits of the rezoning area, she said.

"We just got a lot of information" in the traffic analysis, Rogan added. "I really want everybody to understand we will really use that information."

But Rogan also cautioned that, as a suburban community, Lower Merion faces a challenge in continuing to provide services that residents desire without bolstering its commercial tax base. "Doing nothing, in my mind, is not a choice," she said.

Continued discussion and a presentation of information from the traffic study will be the focus of the next meeting on City Avenue rezoning, a public workshop scheduled for March 29 at 6:30 p.m. at the Township Building, 75 E. Lancaster Ave., Ardmore.