

MAIN LINE TIMES

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(front page)

CIP projects for 2011 eyed by LM commissioners By Cheryl Allison

Giving Lower Merion commissioners a first look at planning for capital projects in 2011 and beyond, township staff outlined only a few potential new projects and changes in current projects in a public workshop June 30.

At the same time, a report from Township Manager Douglas Cleland made it clear that the struggling economy is continuing to have an impact on funding sources that may affect some long-sought and important projects.

Since 2008, at this point in the year, the board of commissioners has begun prioritizing projects for its five-year Capital Improvement Program. Projects have been sorted into categories. "A" projects are those nearing completion or deemed essential. "C" projects are those that can be deferred or are set for outer years. And "B" projects are those that are

"nonessential but desirable."

There is also a "D" category, which includes the program of major renovations to all six of the township's libraries that began this year with Ludington Library in Bryn Mawr and is expected to total some \$25 million.

In presenting what Commissioner Paul McElhaney, chairman of the board's Ad Hoc CIP Committee, termed a "satellite view" of the program — that is, without going into details now — Public Works Director Don Cannon showed a list of "A" projects for 2011 that has not changed much since last year and would continue to include similar priorities for 2012.

Projects classed as "C" last year — including implementation of the Bryn Mawr Master Plan and a variety of park and recreation facility improvements — would be pushed back another year, to 2013 or beyond.

No "B" projects have been identified at this point, Cannon said. There was no discussion of the library projects, which likely will not resume until the township is ready later this year to go to bids for construction of the Bala Cynwyd Library, the next and largest project after Ludington. Cannon said there are no changes in their planning at this time.

A few new projects are being penciled in but each is pending more study. They include potential road improvements in connection with rezoning in the City Avenue corridor. The township is establishing a Transportation Services Area for the corridor, which could permit it to impose transportation-impact fees on developers. For now, Building and Planning Director Bob Duncan said he was putting in a place-marker of \$1 million for such projects, of which \$400,000 to \$500,000 might come from

developers.

Also, with economic-stimulus money, the township is conducting an energy audit of its facilities and may be able to apply a little less than \$500,000 in federal funds to energy-saving projects that are identified.

Similarly there may be recommendations for park-facilities improvements that will arise from a current Parks Master Plan study.

Among current projects, Cannon said more costs are seen for floor repairs at the Bryn Mawr Fire Company. Because bids for the work to reinforce floors in the engine bays have come in substantially higher than budgeted, the figure for that 2010 project is being increased from \$250,000 to \$490,000, he said.

In his report, Cleland focused on funding for several transportation-related projects. He told commissioners the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission had recently issued its draft Transportation Improvement Program, which shapes state and in some cases federal funding for local projects. The TIP looks at a 12-year planning period, divided into three four-year cycles.

"In recent years, due to the economy, the TIP, as all government budgets, has been under a great deal of pressure," Cleland said. Lower Merion Township is seeing "more and more competition" with other municipalities to see its projects funded.

In the new draft TIP, however, he noted some "alarming" changes. Some township projects that had been in previous TIPs are missing entirely while another has been moved back. There is no funding, again, for a project that the township has repeatedly asked to have included: the Ardmore Transit Center project.



Township Manager Douglas Cleland feels the struggling economy is continuing to have an impact on funding sources for upcoming projects.

Among the projects he mentioned are two long-awaited railway-bridge projects: Union Avenue and Pennswood Road. The Union Avenue bridge's omission may just be a technicality, Cleland said; the state had anticipated that construction would start in 2010, while right-of-way acquisition issues will likely push it into 2011.

The Pennswood Road Bridge, however, has been shifted into the second of the four-year cycles, while the township anticipates that it will be ready to start that project sooner. In each of these cases, Cleland said, the township has spent money on design and other pre-construction costs.

"The paradigm for many years has been that if the municipality put forward funds to commence a project, ...then the state would step forward" with construction funds, he said. Now that pattern seems to have changed. Similarly, proposed major highway and

bridge improvements in the Rock Hill Road/Belmont Avenue corridor were pushed back in a previous TIP; now they are not included at all, while Lower Merion has "invested substantial township dollars" to prepare for the project.

"We understand we're not alone," Cleland said. The funding constraints are "a reality of the world we live in today." But he said it is critical to some projects — the Ardmore Transit Center is a prime example — for there to be a commitment in the TIP, in order to "leverage" other funding.

Cleland said, with a period for comment on the draft document ending June 30, he had submitted a letter to DVRPC that day, asking for reconsideration of some projects.

As a former representative to that body, Commissioner Lewis Gould said it was important for Lower Merion to make its needs known. However, he recommended narrowly focusing on "one or two projects

that have enjoyed support in the past." Gould, who has been skeptical of the Ardmore project's chances of success, said he specifically would not seek its inclusion as a new project.

"We have to be very, very focused, very, very realistic, and pick those most likely to be funded," he said. "Like every other organization, [DVRPC] is paying attention to reality," Gould said. And that reality is "there is less and less government money to be spent, and that's not likely to change soon."

As a part of its annual budget process, Lower Merion will develop a draft 2011-2016 Capital Improvement Program to be reviewed this fall.

A final CIP will be adopted along with the township budget in December.