

MAIN LINE TIMES

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(Page 9)

Page 9

City Ave. traffic study's first results are mixed

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For residents of neighborhoods along City Avenue in Lower Merion, there has been a missing piece in months of township discussions of rezoning the corridor.

It's traffic.

Or rather, an understanding of traffic conditions in the area today and how they may change without greater development opportunities in the future.

Have residents been exaggerating the congestion and cut-through traffic they say exist now? Are township officials and planners underestimating the impact of growth?

Now there is a study that begins to answer those questions, and it delivers a mixed message.

In the first public presentation of traffic-analysis results Tuesday night, the answer is yes, there is significant congestion on City Avenue and side streets during rush hour.

And yes, greater density of development without some costly road improvements will add to those problems.

The other part, however, is that without some of those same improvements, conditions will get worse with "background growth" – from projects already on the books or passing through from elsewhere – even if there is no new development on City Avenue.

The traffic study, more technically known as a Roadway Sufficiency Analysis, was done as part of a parallel process to drafting a rezoning ordinance. It's a needed step toward creating a Transportation Services Area for the City Avenue corridor, under which Lower Merion could impose impact fees on developers to help pay for needed transportation improvements.

What the complicated charts prepared by the township's consultant, McMahon Transportation Engineers, show is that, at least for some traffic movements, intersections on and around City Avenue are failing. There are "unacceptable" delays at traffic signals or obstacles to traffic flow. In other words, as McMahon's Ken O'Brien put it, "There is congestion."

(The figures presented look at conditions in the peak hours of 4 to 6 p.m.)

Another purpose of the analysis, though, is to identify improvements that could ease problems. The better news, O'Brien said, is that many of the intersection movements can be improved by modifying signal timing at relatively low cost.

In some other areas, added right, left or through lanes would be needed. Another stage of the study will identify specific improvements and estimate their costs so the township can develop a capital-improvement plan to address them.

Other charts prepared for the study look at conditions 20 years from now, considering both background growth without new development on City Avenue and a scenario based on another product of the Transportation Services Area process – a land-use assumptions report. That report was prepared last summer, based on the zoning ordinance as it existed in draft form at that time.

Like the charts for conditions today, the charts for the year 2030, with and without specific new development, show the need for more improvements. They show a combination of signal adjustments, some new signalized intersections and added lanes.

For the area of City Avenue east of Belmont Avenue to the Schuylkill Expressway, O'Brien said, some intersections will need even more significant improvements. He said McMahon has been asked to take another look at those intersections – including Monument Road and Presidential Boulevard – to see if "longer-term improvements" can be designed.

City Ave. traffic study draws mixed results

From Page 9

O'Brien pointed out that many improvements would be done over time as development occurs.

Looking at the charts, neighborhood residents had a number of questions, not the least of which was: where will the township get the money to carry them out, with state and federal aid uncertain?

Improving transit opportunities could be another element, but how can funding-challenged SEPTA be involved?

That will be the point of developing a capital plan and setting priorities, said Lower Merion board President Liz Rogan.

"Funding has to be addressed in some way, even without development," reminded Building and Planning Director Bob Duncan.

Neighbors saw a conflict between goals of the City Avenue rezoning. On the one hand, the intersection and other road improvements make traffic flow, but perhaps at the expense of the better pedestrian environment that is another priority.

"We have to find that balance," said Duncan. Rogan added, "We have to do both." An improved City Avenue "has to move cars, but it

has to be comfortable for people," she said.

Roger Moog of the Neighborhood Club of Bala Cynwyd summed up the dilemma for many residents. He said that group and the Merion Civic Association, representing the two areas most affected by proposed rezoning, have been meeting to discuss traffic implications.

"The major sobering reality is that the problem is here now, and it will get worse in the next 20 years, with or without development," Moog said.

He told the planners, "People feel, unless they can see improvements made [now], it's difficult to go along with additional density and development and be told, 'Let's worry about funding later.'"

The other realization, Moog said, is that, even if improvements are made, if lanes can be added and City Avenue expanded, of the 21 intersections in the study area "one-third will be better than now, one-third will be the same and one-third will be worse. We will basically be in the same situation as now."

Duncan said a capital plan for traffic-improvement projects should be ready by this summer.

In the meantime, after many months of discussion and significant redrafting, he said the board of commissioners will be asked at an April 13 meeting to consider authorizing advertisement of a public hearing for possible adoption of the rezoning ordinance. The tentative date for that public hearing is May 25.

For the public hearing, Duncan said, it was important to note that the plan now is to move forward with just two pieces of the rezoning: a new Regional Center district mostly encompassing the larger commercial properties east of Belmont Avenue and a separate Bala Cynwyd Retail Center district for the Bala Cynwyd Shopping Center and adjoining parcels.

Rezoning the Bala Avenue business district as a new Bala Village district, which has been controversial in its own right, will be the subject of a series of more workshops and will not be considered as part of the larger rezoning, Duncan said.

A schedule of upcoming meetings is available on the township's Web site, www.lowermerton.org, along with information about the traffic study.