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TUESDAY, OCTOBER 25, 2011

City Ave rezoning worries some in Lower Merion



Montgomery County Principal Planner Scott France, Lower Merion Commissioners George Manos and Brian McGuire and Board of Commissioners President Liz Rogan at the meeting Monday night.

Lower Merion Township's series of public workshops on the City Avenue rezoning ordinance ended this week, but concerns and frustrations linger among some township residents.

"We are a suburban community," said Joan Hindin, president of the Shortridge Civic Association. "We don't want to be so urban looking."

The rezoning ordinance, which seeks to redevelop the corridor of City Avenue to make it more pedestrian friendly, create mixed-use residential and business space, and indoor and outdoor recreational facilities, has been in discussion since 2007. Despite a string of meetings, presentations and workshops since 2008, residents didn't begin raising eyebrows until the March 2011 meetings, when the proposal became reality.

"One of the concerns that's been raised is 'what is the vision for this corridor? What is it that we're trying to

accomplish? How do we get to the point where we are now?' which is the proposed ordinance," said Bob Duncan, township director of building and planning.

Duncan said the goal of the meeting was to provide background and context, as well as go over the current revised rezoning proposal. Duncan gave an overview of the ordinance, which includes constructing buildings close enough to allow for 25 to 40 feet of [sidewalk](#) space from the building to the curb, maximum heights for buildings from 90 to 300 feet, depending on the building's location, and indoor entertainment facilities of up to 50,000 square feet as long as they're a minimum of 800 feet from a lot with residential use.

Halfway through the meeting, attended by about 70 people, Duncan introduced illustrations to provide examples for the possible developments along the [intersection](#) of City and Belmont avenues.

The example, intended to ease apprehension, did anything but comfort audience members.

Richard Kaufman, a Bala Cynwyd Republican running against George Manos for Ward 9 commissioner, said residents have been asking for pictures demonstrating the vision for this project for a while, and that the series of pictures shown did not help the township's efforts.

"This has shown what an absolute crowded, congested, urban area you're creating in a suburban environment that we all enjoy and can at least currently function in," Kaufman said.

"You've made my job easier to try to fight against this ordinance passing at all," he added, which was followed by applause.



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feasible.

Louis Barson, of Merion Station and owner of Hymie's Merion Deli, who is running against Brian McGuire for the Ward 13 commissioner's seat, expressed concern that if developers' projects were approved at the same time, traffic would be a nightmare.

Board of Commissioners President Liz Rogan said that wouldn't happen. She explained that if the proposal were approved, developers would have to submit an [application](#) for projects. Rogan said [applications](#) that come to the Board of Commissioners undergo a review and approval process that can take up to two years.

"Let's say the developer was lucky and was able to get through the process in two years," Rogan hypothesized. "They'd had to have demonstrate through [the ordinance] that they would not impact the levels of service of the intersections beyond what is approved and set for those intersections."

Rogan added that this would be the same process for developers building next to the approved project.

"This is all hypothetical because we can't know what the future is, we can only set the rules up," Rogan added. "Whether or not all those can be done at once, I can't imagine [developers] would be able to get that much development in that short period of time and keep the traffic patterns working the way they have to."

Questions about the proposal aside, tension built following questions and comments from Teri Simon, president of the Wynnewood Civic Association, also previously on the planning commission.

Simon addressed her question to Montgomery County Principal Planner Scott France, who attended the meeting on behalf of the county administration.

"I have to point out that in Lower Merion, there has been an absence of planning, for a number of years," Simon said to France. "Here, Commissioner Rogan is sitting there with a smile on her face, and this isn't funny. This is serious,

ABOUT MAIN LINE NEIGHBORS

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it's the future of Lower Merion.”

Simon, who could barely speak because she was upset, mentioned that residents got an email on Thursday suddenly announcing a special Planning Commission meeting for Oct. 25 at 6:30 p.m. Simon said this was part of the plan to pass this ordinance next month, and asked France why there couldn't be a time out for a master plan, considering the amount of concern he witnessed.

France said he didn't want to comment on the comprehensive planning process in Lower Merion, noting that it's been an issue. He deferred that question to township officials, and said he wasn't sure if a master plan would help.


“From our [the county's] standpoint, we see the area in a broader context, and we support the general goals that have come out of the ordinance and aren't critical of those goals it attempts to address,” he said.


France said he saw the public's concern, but wasn't sure if that was because of misunderstanding the ordinance or other reasons.

Following the meeting's close, many residents left dissatisfied, planning to attend the special planning commission meeting Oct. 25.

“People are fearful of a lot of extreme densification and urbanization,” Simon told Neighbors. “They've [township officials] made some changes...but they haven't changed that.”

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