

Main Line Times

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Traffic impact major piece in City Avenue redevelopment puzzle

By CHERYL ALLISON

A public hearing in Lower Merion Tuesday night was intended to give a township committee feedback on a report that makes some predictions about development in the City Avenue corridor.

It's a piece in a process that could ultimately allow the township to assess impact fees on developers for road improvements needed to handle traffic increases.

The comment that members of the City Avenue Transportation Services Area Advisory Committee heard most often, however, was that more development is almost too much to imagine, given that many roads and intersections in the area today are at "traffic overload."

And that is a situation that this process cannot produce dollars to remedy.

Appointed by the board of commissioners, the TSAAC is working in parallel to consider new zoning for the City Avenue corridor through Merion and Bala Cynwyd.

Its task is threefold. First, to produce a land-use assumptions report — the subject of Tuesday's hearing — which will be the basis of a comprehensive traffic study. This "roadway-sufficiency analysis" then will be used to develop a plan of capital projects to improve the road system.

To generate the land-use assumptions, a planning consultant considered current development plans and interviewed owners of major properties about their future plans. It also considered increased density and potential land uses under the proposed zoning to create a picture of development over 20 years.

Starting from a standpoint that properties will not be developed to the maximum allowed, its ultimate finding is that some 3.6 million square feet of additional development could occur.

What citizens who spoke at the hearing found frustrating was that, while the report does base some assumptions on new zoning, they were asked repeatedly not to address specific aspects of the zoning proposal in this context. A separate series of public hearings will continue in the fall on the draft zoning ordinance.

Nevertheless the prospect of any more development has been, and was again this week, the starting point of concerns in anything connected with the zoning initiative.

It's a concern that the Montgomery County Planning Commission addressed in its comments on the draft land-use assumptions report. Wouldn't it be better, it suggested, to have the zoning in place before predicting development?

Township Building and Planning Director Bob Duncan said it was a choice. The township, understanding that traffic will be an overriding concern, decided to address it early. If the traffic study suggests road improvements aren't feasible to accommodate all of the potential development, the zoning may have to be scaled back, he said.

Merle Zucker, a representative of the Neighborhood Club of Bala Cynwyd on the advisory committee, said it is a "chicken-and-egg" conundrum.

"If we don't make traffic — what's happening right now — a major part of the discussion, ... if we don't ameliorate it in some way, we're not going to get anywhere," she suggested. "This is one situation where the egg has to come before the chicken."

The TSAAC will make its recommendation on the report to the Building and Planning Committee of the board of commissioners July 28, when the public again can comment.

You can read the draft report at www.lowermerion.org.