

MAIN LINE TIMES

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(front page)

City Avenue zoning to get comprehensive look

By Cheryl Allison

Lower Merion Township, in the past few years, has adopted new zoning regulations for Ardmore, Bryn Mawr and the Rock Hill Road corridor to promote revitalized, walkable, live-work communities.

It's no small statement, then, when Board of Commissioners President Bruce Reed describes the effort that's just beginning, in a formal way, for the City Avenue corridor as "easily the most important zoning work we will do for decades."

That process got under way May 26 with the first in what is likely to be a series of public hearings and workshop meetings over several months on a draft City Avenue zoning ordinance.

Already there are two important points of view on what should come out of those discussions.

First, there's a recognition — and some urgency on the part of commercial property owners in that corridor — that the model that worked when the area was being developed as Lower Merion's "Miracle Mile" in the mid-20th century needs an overhaul for the 21st century.

And second, there's concern that redevelopment, with greater density and the traffic that may come with it, not overwhelm the area's well-established residential neighborhoods.

An effort to look comprehensively and in a coordinated way at zoning in the City Avenue corridor, both in Lower Merion and across the road in Philadelphia, has been in the works for more than two years. The city late last summer adopted an ordinance for properties on its side of the street in an area extending from 63rd Street to the Schuylkill River.

There have also been community meetings

with the Neighborhood Club of Bala Cynwyd to explain and update residents on the zoning process.

May 26's hearing, with a detailed presentation on the draft ordinance by Building and Planning Director Bob Duncan, was the first in-depth look at the proposal for commissioners and the broader public. Taking initial public comment, the board opted to continue the public hearing for further discussion. The next date set is June 23.

With the support of a grant from the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, the two municipalities hired consultant Kise Straw & Kolodner to craft legislation to create the new zoning districts.

For the Lower Merion side of City Avenue, the ordinance would create two districts, a Regional Center area from Conshohocken State Road east to the Schuylkill Expressway and a Bala Village area in the vicinity of the Bala Avenue intersections with City and Montgomery avenues.

Among the principles of the zoning are to discourage current patterns of buildings separated from the street by large parking lots and to create new pedestrian-oriented streetscapes.

Increased density would be focused in some areas, with buffer areas adjoining existing neighborhoods in Bala Cynwyd. Incentives would be offered to developers to gain increased density and building height in exchange for features such as public spaces, green roofs or underground or "wrapped" parking structures.

In what will likely be a focus of attention, taller buildings, including several up to 300 feet or 30 stories, are envisioned in

the Regional Center. Building heights would be lower, and the ordinance would provide for buffering from residential neighborhoods and transitional development in the Bala Village district.

Other goals are to make the historically car-driven corridor less so, with increased emphasis on public transit at the Bala and Cynwyd rail stations and a focus on mixed-use development that might transform the area into a 24-hour live-work-shop-play environment.

Some of the models toward which the municipalities are looking are similar mixed-use, transit-oriented development in places like Rockville Town Square and Bethesda, Md.

Among Lower Merion officials, Commissioner Brian Gordon, who represents Merion, has expressed concern that the zoning changes, after a long gestation, might now be rushed to enactment. Also, "I appreciate the goals of the ordinance," he said May 26, "but I think it is currently out of balance." It proposes, he suggested, "an urban landscape where a suburban office park now stands."

Reed and others reassured him, however, that the process of analyzing and hearing public comment on the new zoning districts has been and will continue to be anything but rushed. Not only will the public hearing process continue, but the board, on a suggestion from Building and Planning Committee Chairman Liz Rogan, agreed it would be helpful to hold public workshop meetings on specific topics.

That said, there was strong support for revamping Lower Merion's existing zoning in the area from real-estate and development professionals, who said that not only is the township's prime office

district struggling to stay up-to-date — its newest major office building dates from the 1970s — but that this area is most appropriate for higher-density commercial development.

“This is our business district, where we want commerce to be,” said Gary Brandeis, a member of the City Avenue Special Services District board. As to the office towers that give some people pause, “We’re a suburban community adjacent to the sixth largest city in the country. We’re not in the farm country of Chester County,” he remarked.

David Joss, representing Federal Realty Investment Trust, owner of the Bala Cynwyd Shopping Center, also endorsed new zoning and elaborated on the reasons it is needed. Office tenants looking for the most modern amenities are beginning to look elsewhere, in places like Conshohocken, Joss said. “The new zoning will bring us into the 21st century.”

Federal Realty, which has considered a development plan more in line with the proposed zoning, recently submitted three alternative plans for improvements and new construction at the Bala Cynwyd Shopping Center. All of them, in the

absence of revised zoning, follow the model of strip-mall development with new free-standing bank or retail pad sites.

As the developers of Rockville Town Square and Bethesda Row, Joss said development of those sites took place over time, and City Avenue would be no different. However, the new zoning is needed, Joss said, “to do a Rockville or Bethesda” here.

While areas have seen sprawl development in the past, “the trend now is that people are coming back into the [city] centers,” said Rich Gottlieb of Keystone Property Group, another City Avenue area property owner. Lower Merion’s part of the area, given the attraction of no city wage tax, “is perfectly positioned” to take advantage of that trend, he said.

Their comments were balanced by speakers David Haas and Mark Kocent, both board members of the Neighborhood Club of Bala Cynwyd who have been appointed to represent the civic association on a new Transportation Service Area Advisory Committee looking at potential traffic impacts of development under the proposed zoning.

The civic group, Haas stressed, is “not against development,” and in fact has been supportive of higher-density development at the shopping-center site. However, he said he wanted to note that “the perception that the City Avenue district is sort of sitting by itself isn’t exactly correct. It backs up against the Bala Cynwyd residential community.”

“We don’t object to commercial development at our doorstep,” Haas said, “but we are concerned about the impacts of development on the community,” among which traffic “is a huge concern.”

“This is an area that’s unique,” reminded Kocent. “We’re not Center City. We’re not Conshohocken. We’re not Bethesda.” It’s important, he said, for officials, property owners and residents to carefully consider “what’s the vision for City Avenue.”

“The core behind this ... is to bring development that doesn’t overwhelm [the neighborhoods],” Kocent said, and to agree on a concept that is “a unique vision, not just grabbing pictures from elsewhere.”