

## Drive-thru proposal stalls plan for 'gateway' Taco Bell

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The proposal may be for a fast-food restaurant, but working out a development plan for a very visible corner in Bala Cynwyd has been anything but grab-and-go.

And it isn't ready yet.

After a combined four hours of discussion before Lower Merion's planning commission and board of commissioners last week, the board on the night of Feb. 9 tabled action on a preliminary plan for a Taco Bell on a parcel at the intersection of City Avenue and Conshohocken State Road.

The owners of the longtime gas-station site also have plans to build a second, as yet unspecified, commercial building on the roughly one-acre property.

It is the Taco Bell, which comes with a drive-thru, however, that has sent planners back to the drawing board many times over the past year and more.

It has been the focus of much attention because the application will gain

approval before Lower Merion completes its long-planned rezoning of the City Avenue corridor, one of the goals of which is to promote a more pedestrian-friendly environment along that major road. The site itself is seen as a gateway to the township.

The inclusion of a drive-thru has been one of the most problematic elements as the owners, Bala Investors L.P., and township planners have tried to accommodate those factors.

The plan presented last week takes a 90-degree turn as far as the Taco Bell building is concerned.

At the earlier sketch-plan phase, township staff had encouraged a site plan in which the Taco Bell would have been situated parallel to City Avenue, with the drive-thru lane right next to the road.

Their thinking was that parking would be shifted to the back, screened from City Avenue by the restaurant. The second building was proposed pretty much as it is today, set parallel and close to Conshohocken State Road.

The owners weren't enthusiastic about



The Taco Bell proposed for City Avenue in Lower Merion Township. Image courtesy of the township.

that layout but they were willing to go along.

But the board of commissioners chose what they thought would be a more functional, if more traditional, suburban plan: turning the Taco Bell perpendicular to City Avenue and putting its drive-thru on

the south side of the building. That also eased some concerns about safe access from the drive-thru onto City Avenue.

That is the building orientation proposed in the new, more detailed plan, but the drive-thru, or more specifically a "bypass lane" that would allow diners

who change their minds or don't want to wait to escape the line, is still the sticking point.

The planning commission, meeting Feb. 7, doubted a bypass lane is essential. It recommended eliminating the lane to

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provide more space for trees and other landscaping to green the site.

To press the point, commission members recommended denial of waivers the applicants were seeking to not fully meet requirements of the township's Natural Features Code, which sets types and amounts of landscaping.

They also want to enlarge and beef up a landscaped area at the corner to create a more significant gateway feature.

When the plan came to the board Feb. 9, the Taco Bell owners, represented by attorney George Broseman, sought to have virtually all of the planning commission's conditions revised or deleted. They also presented an alternative landscaping plan that might not require waivers, making the development proposal in effect a by-right plan.

With several member absent, the board was almost evenly split on the question of the bypass lane. Some thought it might avoid tie-ups. Others, including Vice President Mark Taylor, who works professionally with commercial properties, changed their view and argued against it when it was pointed out that it was not a full bypass; because of space constraints, cars would not be able to pass in the area of the restaurant order board.

Planning-commission member Brian Hirsch summed up that panel's push to drop the lane. It was their idea that, if the lane were eliminated, the building might be shifted slightly and make space for a landscaped island in the parking field between the two

buildings, breaking up that paved area.

"One of the most important things to consider is the location of the property ... at an entrance to the township," Hirsch suggested. "How it gets developed is fairly significant."

Regarding the bypass lane, the board has to "decide between the applicant's interests for the convenience of its customers and the township's interests," Hirsch said.

At that point, hearing that and other questions about various conditions of approval, board President Liz Rogan said it didn't seem the application wasn't ready for action.

"We've been doing this for 16 months. It is so ready to go," replied Broseman.

Jim Nasuti, a partner in Bala Investors, also stepped in at that point. He said he preferred to keep the bypass lane, for restaurant operations, but could live without it if need be.

On the other hand, he pointed out, he and his development team have worked with planning staff to develop a plan that was at least cognizant of the City Avenue goals, even though they are somewhat a moving target at this point.

"It's frustrating to hear yet another person want to redesign" this plan, he said.

On Commissioner Cheryl Gelber's motion, the board voted to table the plan until a special Building and Planning Committee meeting Feb. 16, to see if acceptable conditions can be worked out.

That meeting will be held right before the regular board meeting at 8 p.m. at the Township Building, 75 E. Lancaster Ave., Ardmore.