

MAIN LINE TIMES

Wednesday, September 15, 2010

Form vs. function issue in Taco Bell plan

by Cheryl Allison

Over the past six months Lower Merion's planning staff has worked with the developers of a piece of land in Bala Cynwyd to try to drive the project they have planned – a Taco Bell restaurant and another retail or restaurant building – in the same direction as proposed new zoning for the City Avenue corridor.

They looked at dozens of configurations for the one-acre site at City Avenue and Conshohocken State Road, a former gas station where leaky tanks have contaminated the soil and groundwater.

As it turned out, though, township commissioners, meeting as the Building and Planning Committee Monday night, seemed to prefer a different choice from the menu than the "Plan A" staff was recommending.

In an unusual move, the committee recommended approval of a tentative sketch plan based on that Plan A.

But, asked by the developers to weigh in on an alternative – a more conventional layout – a majority of the commissioners present leaned, reluctantly, toward Plan B.

Pushing a final decision a little farther down the road, they included as a condition of approval a request that Bala Investors LP, the property's would-be owners, continue to work with planners on such fundamental issues as the fast-food restaurant's placement on the site before the plan comes back for the next stage of review.

Like the township's planning commission, members of the board were clearly of the mind that the proposed new commercial buildings would be a big improvement for the damaged site.

Similarly, though, Bala Cynwyd Commissioner George Manos thought the plan was a "missed opportunity for

the community" on a corner some called a "gateway" to Lower Merion.

In the new zoning being considered for the City Avenue corridor, an important goal is to encourage mixed-use development that is single-story and single-use. The Taco Bell would have a drive-thru.

Plan A, which places the Taco Bell building parallel to City Avenue and the second building parallel to Conshohocken State Road, aims toward the new pattern by pushing the buildings closer to the street and sidewalk and shifting parking to the rear, where it is somewhat screened from view. Enhanced landscaping at the corner would promote its gateway stature.

The drive-thru, which Taco Bell says is essential to its business, is, however, "driving" the plan, Assistant Building and Planning Director Chris Leswing remarked.

To achieve the 200-foot vehicle-queue length required by township code, the drive-thru aisle begins at the rear of the site, at the Conshohocken State Road access, and circles the site to a pick-up window on the City Avenue side.

To exit to the right would require nearly a U-turn movement onto the road.

The principals of Bala Investors are Jim and Celeste Nasuti of Bryn Mawr. They also own the nearby KFC restaurant on City Avenue and an existing Taco Bell on the Philadelphia side, which they said would be closed for relocation to this site.

Their attorney, George Broseman, told commissioners his clients are prepared to proceed with Plan A but also wanted to present an alternative concept that, in their view, has "certain advantages for circulation,"

This Plan B sites the Taco Bell perpendicular to City Avenue. A double drive-thru lane meets the 200-foot requirement while keeping the pick-up area on the far side of the restaurant and making possible a direct right-turn exit to City Avenue.

The Plan B configuration is more typical of the free-standing, pad-type development seen on City Avenue for decades.

Broseman said either plan is a by-right plan under existing zoning. After many months, he told commissioners, his clients were asking for an approval, but, as the project moves forward to preliminary plan review, also wanted to "get feedback if there is a feeling which one is preferred."

As commissioners responded, a theme emerged. Board members liked the intentions and appearance of Plan A but worried about its functionality – enough so that there was strong encouragement for staff and the applicants to keep working on siting the buildings.

As the ward representative for a large part of the City Avenue corridor, Manos remarked that "the idea of [the proposed zoning] is to get buildings close to the sidewalk and to have storefront windows next to the sidewalk." It was hard to see how that could happen with a drive-thru along City Avenue, he said.

"We've traded off shielding the parking [against] a good pedestrian experience," Manos said.

Commissioner Rick Churchill seemed to sum up the conflict for several of his colleagues, saying, "I like the aesthetics of Plan A but the practicality of Plan B is more important."