

MAIN LINE TIMES

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(Letters)

Letters: Commissioners weigh in on City Avenue rezoning

TO OUR BALA CYNWYD AND MERION NEIGHBORS:

We write as representatives of Bala Cynwyd to comment on a letter from our colleague, Commissioner Brian Gordon, regarding the proposed City Avenue rezoning ordinance (Main Line Times, May 27, 2010).

As he is our colleague, and as his district (Merion) abuts Bala Cynwyd, we value his views and of course those of his constituents. It goes without saying they are free to voice them. In the case of his letter, however, Commissioner Gordon himself realized that the representations in it constituted a rush to judgment on a matter in which, based on the content of the letter, he clearly was not informed. He apologized for the letter the evening before its publication during the May 26 public hearing on the proposed ordinance. We appreciate this gracious act, since if readers were to take the content seriously, they would be substantively misinformed about the nature of the proposed zoning

changes and about the community outreach surrounding it. Nonetheless it is important that the record be set straight on the matter, which is the reason we write this note.

One of Commissioner Gordon's key complaints was that the ordinance was progressing without citizen input. Since he wrote the letter, however, we have learned from him that he was unaware of the amount of information that had been exchanged with the residential community during the formative stages of the proposed City Avenue rezoning ordinance. As well, he was unaware of the inclusive approach taken by the neighbors and by us as well by way of either holding or attending numerous meetings over the last two years to review the features of the ordinance, mostly with members of the Neighborhood Club of Bala Cynwyd — meetings that are still ongoing. Every measure available was taken to ensure that input from the residents was both sought and considered. Presently an extensive townshipwide public outreach is taking

place, by way of hearings and other processes, that will afford public scrutiny of the ordinance — processes that are either in progress, were already conducted or are upcoming. Upon learning all this, Commissioner Gordon concluded that his assertion that the ordinance was being “rushed through” was unfounded.

It would serve little purpose at this juncture to detail the points in the letter that contain erroneous information but instead we invite all interested parties to attend the ongoing hearings or to watch them on TV and to become factually informed both about the issues within the boundaries of the district that underlie the proposed changes and the ways the proposed changes attempt to address them.

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More on Brian Gordon's column

TO THE EDITOR:

In his recent letter to the Main Line Times [May 27, 2010], Lower Merion Commissioner Brian Gordon expressed concern over elements of a proposal to overhaul the zoning along City Avenue currently being considered by Lower Merion Township.

The City Avenue office center, between the Schuylkill Expressway and Belmont Avenue, was once the premier office address in suburban Philadelphia but is now facing serious challenges for quality tenants from newer centers such as Conshohocken. The City Avenue office area, characterized by low-density, auto-oriented, mid-rise, single-use office

buildings surrounded by surface parking lots, was the epitome of successful commercial development in the last half of the 20th century. However, throughout the country, auto-oriented single-use office centers such as City Avenue are now being eclipsed by more dynamic mixed-use centers, with retail, housing and office uses in close proximity, that incorporate landscaped pedestrian plazas and structured parking rather than parking lots. Greater density, coupled with well-designed public open space, is important to encourage pedestrian activity, support transit use, reduce dependence on the automobile and create a sense of place.

Over the last two years, the City Avenue District has been working with the

township planners, adjacent community and property owners to revamp the zoning along the City Avenue corridor to allow and encourage the type of development that can allow City Avenue to regain its status as a premier location for investment, create a place of which the community can be proud and make a greater contribution to the economy of the township over the coming decades.

The draft zoning ordinance was presented for initial discussion at the township meeting last Wednesday. Subsequent meetings at the township are planned over the coming months to provide an opportunity for community input into every aspect of the proposed ordinance, including such issues as

building setbacks, impervious coverage, building height, density and building bulk and spacing standards. A major aspect of the work will be completion of a traffic analysis that will evaluate the traffic impacts of anticipated additional development, and identification and timing of required transportation improvements.

We believe, however, that the current draft ordinance addresses many of the concerns expressed by Commissioner Brian Gordon. Different zoning requirements are proposed to different areas of the City Avenue District. The ordinance recognizes the special character of the Bala Avenue Commercial District, and regulations have been crafted to maintain and enhance the character of this district, including strict controls on building height. While an increase in allowable density and allowable building height is proposed for parcels close to City Avenue, east of Belmont Avenue, different regulations would apply to the area north of St. Asaphs Road, closer to the residential community, where lower densities and building heights are proposed. Even for parcels close to City Avenue, the allowable density under the proposed zoning changes (defined as floor-area ratio, the total area of the building divided by the area of the site) is no higher than

that of the recently built Corinthian Condominium development on Presidential Boulevard, a development that many in the community see as a positive contribution to Lower Merion.

The draft ordinance provides for an increase in permitted building height for parcels close to City Avenue, to provide, with the same density, the opportunity for more pedestrian-oriented open space and plazas at ground level. However, the ordinance includes strict dimensional constraints on both the footprint of high buildings and spacing between these buildings. Commissioner Gordon mentions Society Hill Towers and the compact residential towers of Vancouver, B.C., as positive examples of high-rise buildings. This pattern of widely separated compact buildings is exactly the model that the ordinance is designed to encourage, where such buildings would be permitted.

A focus of the ordinance is to promote green design. The draft regulations mandate minimum development setbacks from the curb line, to provide for wide and landscaped sidewalks, and a green, pedestrian-friendly environment. Incentives are provided to encourage developers to provide public plazas and gathering places, to create a sense of place

and provide features such as green roofs.

The draft ordinance is designed to promote a walkable human scale and includes strict development-design standards to assure that new buildings are attractive, pedestrian-friendly and oriented to the street. It includes a requirement for a completely linked network of walkways linking transit stops, buildings, open space and parking. The ordinance includes requirements for landscaped buffers to screen any parking structures. Incentives are provided to screen decked parking with active building uses or place some or all parking underground.

We believe that new zoning standards for the City Avenue District, developed in concert with the business owners and residential community, will provide the opportunity to remake the City Avenue area as an attractive, vibrant, “green” and economically successful place that respects the character of the Bala neighborhood and meets the challenges of the 21st century.

Sincerely,

TERRENCE J. FOLEY
President & CEO
City Avenue Special Services District
Bala Cynwyd