

MAIN LINE TIMES

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Lower Merion considers trying for City Avenue grant money

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It could be a Solomon's choice, or it could be double good news for Lower Merion Township and the larger region.

Less than a month after the board of commissioners agreed to pursue grant funding for extension of the Cynwyd Heritage Trail across a reopened Manayunk Bridge, it has been asked to explore a similar opportunity for another top priority: traffic improvements on City Avenue.

It's complicated, but in authorizing submission of an application for a \$500,000 state Department of Community and Natural Resources grant to support reopening the bridge, township planning staff said they were hoping to work with Montgomery County to use another grant as leverage and reduce any direct contribution of township tax dollars.

That second grant opportunity is being offered by the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission. Its Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality (CMAQ) grants are designed to reduce vehicle emissions by taking cars off roadways and reducing idling.

Last week, commissioners heard about another CMAQ grant proposal, this one being pursued in cooperation with Philadelphia. City Avenue Special Services District executive director Terry Foley made a presentation April 11 on an application the organization would like to submit for traffic signal upgrades in the City Avenue corridor.

Called an adaptive signal system,

Foley described it as a state-of-the-art system to reduce traffic congestion at intersections.

That, of course, has been a hot topic as the township has considered and adopted a sweeping rezoning ordinance for revitalization of the City Avenue commercial corridor. A plan to deal with existing congestion and failing or failed intersections has been a prerequisite sought by community residents for the zoning changes, which are the subject of another public hearing April 25.

In December, the board of commissioners adopted an ordinance creating two new zoning districts, but postponed the effective date to April 30. Up for consideration next week are a number of amendments and a proposed "Official Map" showing the preferred locations of new streets, public gathering spaces and trails with redevelopment.

In his presentation, Foley said the adaptive signal system proposed is "next-generation technology" that has been used in several other states in recent years and has been approved by PennDOT.

Locally, it has been used at the intersection of Route 202/Dekalb Pike and North/South Gulph Road near the King of Prussia Mall, which sees 75,000 vehicles per day pass through, a volume similar to what is seen at Presidential Boulevard and City Avenue.

The system uses video cameras to measure traffic volumes and queuing at intersections and interactively adjust signals to reduce or eliminate delays and keep traffic moving. In King of Prussia, results have been dramatic, Foley said. Travel time has been reduced, and failure

to clear intersection approaches in a signal cycle have been virtually eliminated.

In a traffic-improvement capital-projects plan developed for City Avenue, 12 intersections in and around the corridor were identified with signal delays and queues not being cleared. With an adaptive signal system, "I think we have the method" to make those improvements on City Avenue, Foley told the board.

The CMAQ grant proposal for City Avenue is for \$1 million, for which a local match of 20 percent, or \$200,000 would be required. Lower Merion Township has included in its most recent Capital Improvement Program \$100,000 for a first phase of City Avenue intersection improvements. Foley said he has a commitment from Philadelphia for another \$100,000.

Where the situation possibly becomes problematic is that, if the township chooses to pursue a CMAQ grant for City Avenue, it might come into competition with the Manayunk Bridge grant, Lower Merion planning staff explained last week.

Foley and the planners think that may not be the case, because the two applications would be put forward by different entities, Montgomery County for the bridge and Philadelphia for the signalization project.

The deadline for grant applications is in May. Before then, there will be the chance to explore the alternatives further, said Angela Murray, the township's assistant director of community and economic development.

If it appears that the grants might be in competition, Murray said, the board might have to consider which should be

given higher priority.

The board's initial response was to look into alternatives for both projects.

President Liz Rogan describe the City Avenue proposal as "a remarkable project," but cautioned that "it is critical that the township not be penalized because it is willing to be a regional player" with others.

"Traffic has been the main concern in City Avenue rezoning," commented Commissioner Brian McGuire, who represents part of Bala Cynwyd. The proposal seems to be "a great opportunity to move forward."

Fellow Bala Cynwyd Commissioner George Manos, a strong supporter of the trail project, said he hopes the township can get both grants, but added that "I can't imagine a more important project than City Avenue."

On the other hand, Commissioner Scott Zelov, who chairs the board's Parks and Recreation Committee, cautioned planners, "If you come back to us and ask us to vote A or B, my vote is for the Manayunk Bridge."

Murray said there is no limit on the number of applications the township can support.

She said planning staff would return to a Building and Planning Committee and the full board either at a special meeting later in April – possibly on April 25 – or early May to report what it has learned and potentially seek approval for a City Avenue grant application.

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