

MAIN LINE TIMES

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New look for City Ave. corner: A Taco Bell?

By Cheryl Allison

With new zoning under consideration in Lower Merion Township to encourage revitalization and a new pattern of development in the City Avenue corridor, it's unlikely anyone would have envisioned a new fast-food restaurant with a drive-thru as an ideal project for a prominent corner.

But that is what is proposed for the "gateway" location at the intersection of City Avenue and Conshohocken State Road in Bala Cynwyd.

And on Tuesday night the township's planning commission, on a 3-1 vote, recommended approval of a sketch plan for a Taco Bell restaurant and another as-yet-unidentified retail/restaurant building at 5 W. City Ave. as the best it's going to get.

The proposal is set to go to the board of commissioners' Building and Planning Committee for review Sept. 13.

The plan submitted by Bala Investors L.P., the equitable owners of the roughly one-acre parcel, would replace an existing Lukoil gas station/car wash that has been vacant for several years.

The site of a gas station for more than 60 years, the parcel is what Assistant Building and Planning Director Chris Leswing said must be characterized as a brownfield site.

The underground tanks on the property have leaked in the past, contaminating the soil and groundwater. Under the current ownership, the site is subject to a cleanup that could take three to six years.

According to information prepared by planning staff on the proposal, the contamination is such that residential development is precluded for at least 20 years. The type of mixed-use development envisioned by the new zoning — which might have been especially desirable given the proximity of the Bala Train Station, simply "isn't going to happen," Leswing said.

That said, Leswing noted that what might have been proposed for the site "could be a lot worse." In fact the plan that township officials

are now reviewing comes forward after nearly a year of discussion with planning staff, he said.

An alternative plan, which the applicant has set aside, called for a bank building with five drive-thru lanes.

In working with the applicant, Leswing and Bala Investors' attorney, George Broseman, both said the plan has had several versions, designed, on the township's part, to minimize the visual impact of the drive-thru.

The current proposal is for a site plan that, after demolishing the gas station and car wash, puts the 2,820-square-foot Taco Bell parallel to City Avenue, with the drive-thru window on the City Avenue side.

Though that may seem counter-intuitive, it is a configuration that both accommodates the 200-foot drive-thru queuing lane required by township code and uses the building to screen restaurant parking.

The drive-thru lane closest to City Avenue would itself be screened from view by a 4-foot wall and landscaping, Leswing said.

Also proposed on the site is a second pad site for a 2,400-square-foot commercial building, whose use is speculative for now. That building would run parallel and next to Conshohocken State Road.

Answering a question from commission member Charles Howland, Sally Inmon, a principal of Bala Investors, said that, because of the contamination, the buildings would both be built on slabs and that a soil vapor-barrier system would be required.

A proposed landscaped area at the point closest to the City Avenue/Conshohocken State Road intersection is a bow to the site's gateway location.

Leswing said the plan has been designed to reduce curb cuts on City Avenue, with one right-in/right-out access. The new owners would also install a new, wider sidewalk along



an easement to the Bala Station that runs along the rear of the property.

The plan still has some problematic issues that must be worked out at the next stage of review at the preliminary-plan phase. Those include how stormwater management would be handled — because of the contamination, it cannot be by recharging into infiltration beds — and configuration of the exit from the drive-thru lane onto City Avenue, where drivers would have to negotiate a sharp right turn.

While an alternative plan might have relieved some site issues, Broseman said the owners are agreeable to the current plan to meet some of the township's goals.

"We know this probably is not the first choice of everybody here" for the site, he acknowledged, "but it has been vacant and contaminated. We think it's a good plan for the site, and a great improvement over what's there now."

It was in that light that most planning-commission members saw the proposal, leading co-chair Robert Gray to "reluctantly" recommend approval.

"It's obviously not consistent with the direction we would like to see the corridor move in, but it's an enormous improvement over what we have," Gray said. "There's no perfect plan, but this is about as good as we're going to get."

Commission members Howland and Laura Shell, with similar reservations, joined Gray in voting in favor. Member Brian O'Leary, who said he could not support the plan, was opposed.