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## Phila., Lower Merion team to overhaul City Ave.

By Diane Mastrull

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Much was made of the installation of a fluorescent sign at the northern gateway to City Avenue a year ago - a gesture meant to convey that the commercial corridor straddling Philadelphia and Lower Merion Township was, indeed, open for business.

> Now comes the real show.

> Public debate will begin in City Council chambers and Lower Merion's town hall early in the new year over plans to turn the largely disjointed and outdated business boulevard into a cohesive reside

work/shop community.

> Specifically, city and township officials will consider adopting a zoning plan that would allow condominium and office towers as high as 30 stories at the City Avenue end nearest the Schuylkill Expressway.

> Overall, the plan would encourage more mixed-use neighborhoods, and as a result of street and sidewalk design, try to change the preferred mode of travel there from automobile to foot, bus and train. Proponents say the finished product would look like the recently revitalized Wisconsin Avenue in Bethesda, Md.

> That's quite a cooperative leap in a state where municipalities are not required to care how their development policies affect one another. In fact, the City Avenue initiative is believed to be the only multijurisdictional zoning effort under way in Pennsylvania.

> But land-use experts contend that collaboration is essential if the highly traveled border route of predominantly low-rise, 50-year-old office buildings, fast-food restaurants and strip shopping centers is ever going to become a thriving, pedestrian-friendly, mixed-use model of smart growth.

> "It cries out for cooperation," said Richard Bickel, planning director at the Delaware Valley

Regional Planning Commission. That the city and Lower Merion are taking a stab at it has Bickel seemingly in awe.

> "As a planner, we talk about this kind of cooperation, but we don't see it very often," he said.

> Angela Murray, a planner for Lower Merion, said today's City Avenue was a testament to when "you've got one major thoroughfare and two completely different zoning districts, how that contributes to a dysfunctional roadway."

> The partnership has been in the works since 1999, when Philadelphia and Lower Merion formed the City Avenue Special Services District - one of 1,500 business-improvement zones in North America, but the only one to cross political boundaries.

> The city's main advocate for the merger was Mayor Nutter, who at the time was a city councilman. The district's board of directors is composed of nine representatives from Philadelphia and nine from Lower Merion, who all are either owners of commercial or industrial property in the district, or merchants there.

> The special services district encompasses City Avenue from the Schuylkill Expressway to 63d Street (on the city side) and Wynnewood Road (on the township side).

> Until now, improving lighting and security have been the priority.

> Establishing a new development foundation for the area through zoning is substantially more complex. Consider that Lower Merion's recent rezoning of its Bryn Mawr business district in hopes of sparking revitalization there took more than a year of public hearings and debate.

> Bruce Reed, chairman of commissioners in Lower Merion, ventured no guess on a time frame for the board's consideration of the City Avenue zoning plan.

> Among the things he will have to be convinced of before supporting it, he said, is that the plan is not an invitation for "unfettered growth."

> The project's leading advocate on City Council, Curtis Jones Jr., was not offering a timetable either, but he said he was "highly confident that this will pass."

> He promptly rattled off a list of reasons he's bullish on the plan.

> "Money, taxes and beautiful development can come from bridging the mind-set that separates two counties," he said.

> According to projections from Econsult Corp., redevelopment of the City Avenue district could result in total business revenue increasing as much as \$1.3 billion by 2017. Commercial office property values for the entire area could rise up to \$230 million, including new construction and the increased value of existing structures, in that same time period.

> For Lower Merion, property-tax revenue would increase \$4.4 million by 2017. For Philadelphia, wage tax revenue could climb \$1.8 million each year by then, Econsult found.

> For help in drafting a proposal for City Avenue, the Special Services District hired Center

City planning consultant Kise Straw & Kolodner Inc.

> What it came up with were proposed changes to the area's 1950s-era zoning that enables the essentials of smart-growth development, such as high-density housing and high-rise office buildings, which limit construction's footprint and increase the likelihood of pedestrian activity.

> On both sides of City Avenue, current parking and building setback requirements make it nearly impossible to develop a truly walkable community of housing that sits atop stores, all within a comfortable stroll of offices and the two SEPTA rail lines serving the area.

> The new zoning proposal reduces how much buildings are set back from the road to eliminate the unappealing seas of asphalt that front so many office complexes and shops along City Avenue.

> Facade guidelines are also included to bring some semblance of an aesthetic plan to what is now a jumble of looks along a route that, in its better days, was known as "The Golden Mile."

> Among those believing - and hoping - better days are ahead is Rich Gottlieb, senior vice president for operations development at Keystone Property Group Inc. The real estate company moved its headquarters from Conshohocken to City Avenue's Lower Merion side - where there is no city wage tax - less than a year ago. Keystone currently owns two office buildings on City Avenue representing \$46 million in investments, including extensive renovations made to both aging structures.

> "We like to think we're ahead of the curve," said Gottlieb, who favors the new zoning plan as a means to achieving "world class" buildings on the city's edge.

> Given the dismal economic environment and the paralyzing effect that has had on development, City Avenue will not change significantly anytime soon - even with swift passage of the new zoning.

> Actually, the economic crisis is the perfect time to begin the rezoning process, said Terrence Foley, president and chief executive officer of City Avenue Special Services District.

> "Regardless of what's going on, you always have to be looking forward," he said. "We should have ourselves in the position that when the market turns around, we're ready to go."

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