

Planners, residents hash out visions for City Avenue rezoning

By Cheryl Allison

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Responding to some Bala Cynwyd residents' concern that redevelopment will rob them of their local shopping center, Lower Merion Township planning staff are recommending a change in a proposed City Avenue rezoning ordinance.

In the latest in a series of workshops and public hearings on the initiative Jan. 4, discussion also focused on the incentives that might be available to developers to provide amenities in exchange for increased density.

After hearing neighbors of the Bala Cynwyd Shopping Center call last month to have the property removed from a new Regional Center Area zone offering the greatest potential for new development and redevelopment, Building and Planning Director Bob Duncan proposed an alternative.

Although the idea is still a work in progress, Duncan said the rezoning ordinance may be

revised to include a separate Neighborhood Retail Center designation. It would include the shopping center and two other parcels at City Avenue and Conshohocken State Road.

(One of the two additional parcels, on the western side of Conshohocken State Road – the former Lukoil site – is set to be developed with a Taco Bell restaurant and a second, as yet undetermined, restaurant/retail building.)

The neighbors' concern is that, if the shopping center is rezoned, its owners may choose to redevelop it for office or office/residential use, reducing or eliminating its function as a retail center serving the nearby community.

As Duncan explained it, in the Neighborhood Retail Center concept, a certain percentage of ground-floor space would have to be retail or personal-services uses listed in the ordinance. Other development on the parcels would be mixed-use buildings.

While those aspects of the recommendation, intended to ensure that a retail-center component

continues to be a primary feature, seemed to appeal to neighbors, neither they nor a representative of the shopping center's current owners were entirely enthusiastic.

Area residents were troubled that the proposed building-height limit on much of the shopping-center parcel would still be set at 120 feet, nearly double today's limit of 65 feet.

If any taller buildings are to be permitted, suggested David Haas of the Neighborhood Club of Bala Cynwyd, they should be restricted to the part of the shopping-center parcel closer to City Avenue and farther away from the existing residential neighborhood on the St. Asaph's Road side.

Dave Joss, a vice president of Federal Realty Investment Trust, which owns the center, said the idea was too new and undefined for him to comment fully. "I don't know why [these parcels] are being separated out" from the original Regional Center Area boundaries, he said, however.

Joss said he was concerned the special designation might place

some restrictions on Federal Realty's property that might not be imposed on other parcels in the RCA that might in future be developed with retail components.

"You've said what your company does is retail, but what if the ownership changes?" Duncan remarked. "This gives the opportunity to redevelop," he said, "but requires retail" to be a primary focus.

Neighbors continued to ask why the existing 65-foot height limit isn't adequate for redevelopment while also citing a lingering concern about the rezoning in general: how additional traffic from new, dense development will be handled on roads that are already often congested.

While those questions will certainly come up again as discussion of City Avenue rezoning continues over the next several months, the talk Tuesday night shifted to another controversial component. That is, what types of bonuses and how much increased density should developers be able to gain for including desired features and amenities in their plans?

This month, in addition to proposed incentives for such items as

structured, underground or "wrapped" parking, mixed-use rather than single-use buildings, and public gathering spaces, Duncan also asked workshop participants to consider two more categories of incentives.

In one, a developer might be allowed more density for providing some type of public-transit facility. In the other, a bonus would be gained if a property owner preserved or renovated a structure listed on the township's Historic Resources Inventory.

Initially the bonus suggested for a public-transit facility was relatively small, an increase of 0.1 in what is referred to as the Floor Area Ratio of development.

(In the Regional Center Area, the proposed range of FAR is 0.6 to 2.25.)

Developers could increase density by seeking multiple incentives, the highest being an increase of 0.5 FAR for underground parking.

Duncan and others said the term "public-transit facility" needs to be more fully defined – should a bus stop count, for example, or should the amenity be more significant?

Anne Greenhaugh, president of the Neighborhood Club, suggested that the ranking of incentives now seems to be seen through the eyes of the developer; the greatest incentives are for the most costly items, generally parking structures.

But "do these bonuses reflect the community's priorities?" she wondered. Seen from the residents' viewpoint, incentives for public transit or historic preservation seemed undervalued, she said.

Agreeing that the workshop format has been productive, the group decided to alter the pattern of alternating workshops and more formal public hearings in the next months.

The next scheduled meeting on Jan. 25 at 6:30 p.m. will thus be another workshop, to focus on parking requirements in the ordinance.

The following meeting, on March 1, will be the next public hearing.

More information about the City Avenue rezoning proposal are on the township's Web site, www.lowermerion.org.