

MAIN LINE TIMES

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(front page)

Public's input invited on City Avenue discussions

By Cheryl Allison

Some in Lower Merion look at proposed new zoning for the City Avenue corridor, with its opportunities for office or residential towers 20 to 30 stories high in some places, and see a future landscape out of sync with its suburban setting.

Others see a scope and scale of redevelopment and reinvestment that is essential if the area is to survive as a desirable commercial district — and as a critical part of the township's tax base.

Those were the dominant points of view at a public hearing June 23, the second in a series in which the discussion about City Avenue's future is just warming up.

The topic is so large and carries such a potential impact on township life even beyond the corridor's boundaries that officials are working on a plan to break it into more manageable, more focused pieces.

Building and Planning Director Bob Duncan opened the session by announcing that the hearing would be resumed July 14 to do nothing more than set a clear schedule of dates and topics for public hearings and less formal workshops.

While workshop meetings may be scheduled in late July and early August, Duncan said no additional public hearing would be scheduled before September.

Although significant public discussion in Lower Merion has begun only recently, a new, coordinated form of zoning for the area along City Avenue from 63rd Street to the Schuylkill River has been the focus of efforts by the township and the City of Philadelphia for more than two years.

They arose out of a recognition that buildings in the office parks that once earned a part of the corridor distinction as "The Golden Mile" are becoming

outdated, that tenants are passing over them for more modern space in Conshohocken or King of Prussia, and that existing zoning doesn't provide the potential for reinvestment and renewal.

Under a grant from the Delaware Valley Regional Planning Commission, new zoning has been drafted that is intended to promote mixed-use development and a more pedestrian-friendly, less automobile-oriented streetscape and building pattern, with opportunities for greater density in some locations that could mean dramatically increased building height. Philadelphia has already adopted new zoning for its part of the corridor.

It was some of those features — height limits, setbacks, spacing requirements and potential density of development — on which Duncan wanted to get feedback as an initial step last week.

And it was quick in coming, from two directions.

Looking at examples of the type of development officials of the township and the City Avenue Special Services District hold up as models, St. Asaph's Road resident Deborah Hoffman thought the solution, if there is a problem of decline, was too drastic.

"Bala Cynwyd is in the suburbs," she said. Its residents "chose suburban living. I didn't think the goal was to create another city."

"I've watched you on TV, and I had to make my appearance here because this is too close to where we live," Mary Ammon, a St. Asaph's neighbor, told commissioners. "To have more traffic, more noise ... I just can't accept this.

"You can make money" with

redevelopment, she added, "but I don't think you really need to affect the quality of life."

Like them, other residents who spoke seemed to focus on those areas in the corridor where more intensive development could occur literally across a street from established residential neighborhoods.

Bala Avenue resident Barry Polis, who urged the township to do more to notify and involve residents — the first two public hearings have begun at 6 p.m., too early for many returning from work, he said — had a pointed exchange with Commissioner George Manos over a subsection of the ordinance for a "Bala Village" area.

Manos, who represents the area, pointed to existing zoning that has resulted in parcels at the City Avenue end of Bala Avenue being developed with low-rise office buildings separated from the street by large surface parking lots.

"If those buildings were 20 feet from the street and the parking was in the rear, would that be better or worse?" Manos asked. To that hypothetical, Polis responded, "If your grandmother shaved, she'd be your grandfather."

Martin Piltch, representing the Merion Civic Association, said the organization had met and discussed the ordinance. It also focused on building height.

"In short," Piltch said, "we don't think any structure anywhere in the township should exceed 120 feet."

The need for significantly revised zoning drew passionate support, however, from former commissioner and former state representative Lita Cohen. "It's important that people understand the history of this

area of City Avenue and the economic impact — what will happen if [this ordinance] does not get passed.”

Cohen, who noted that she had lived in nearby Merion since the 1950s, before City Avenue’s office parks arose, reminded listeners of a period in the 1970s and 1980s when the crime rate in the area increased and property values were in decline.

Later, working with Philadelphia, the township established the City Avenue Special Services District, the first multi-jurisdictional entity of its kind in the nation. “Crime is now below the 1970s rate. Property values have skyrocketed. We’ve attracted younger people... When the office buildings came, the neighborhood prospered,” she said.

“One of the reasons our schools are so good, that our streets get plowed, is because we have a very healthy [commercial] tax base,” Cohen went on to say. “If [today’s tenants] move out, what are we left with?” All of us residents, we

have to look at the bigger picture.” “Now we’re at a turning point,” Cohen said. With no action, “I guarantee it will be back to the 1970s.”

Duncan acknowledged that a number of questions have been raised about elements of the draft ordinance, including whether incentives of increased density or height for certain features are appropriate.

“I’m sitting here feeling like we’ve bitten off more than we can chew,” allowed Commissioner Cheryl Gelber.

There seems to be a position, Commissioner Brian Gordon said, that rezoning has to be accepted as a whole package. “I’m just not sure about that,” he said. “My view, my instinct listening to the residents, is that there is a balance that has to be struck.”

Hearing the comments, however, board Vice President Mark Taylor and Commissioner Phil Rosenzweig found a perhaps rare point of agreement.

Taylor, who works in commercial real-estate investment, observed, “This whole hearing has been about speculating and fear of the unknown. What’s there now is an area in decline, ugly and chaotic [in parts]. That should be something we want to change as soon as possible.”

“I appreciate the concerns of the neighbors,” Rosenzweig remarked, but added, “My biggest concern is that we’re going to limit and scale down this ordinance [so that] nothing gets built, nothing happens.”

“The realities are, the buildings are obsolete. In five or 10 years as leases expire, nobody’s going to be in those buildings.” Current zoning “will render [them] white elephants, empty shells that will not contribute to anyone’s welfare,” Rosenzweig said. Acknowledging that it might not be a popular view, he added that, while “being mindful of the concerns,” the community “has to come together under the premise that we have to grant the greatest development rights possible.”



An artist's rendering shows an idea for East City Avenue along the block between Decker Boulevard and Kings Grant Drive where Saks Fifth Avenue currently sits. View more slides of business districts at www.lowermerion.org.