

MAIN LINE TIMES

Main Line Voices

Page 6

MAIN LINE TIMES/MainLineMediaNews.com

Thursday, April 28, 2011

Residents respond to Terrence Foley's column regarding City Avenue

Terrence Foley's column regarding City Avenue previously appeared online at www.mainlinemedianews.com. It is reprinted on Page 5 today.

It's only natural that Terrence Foley, City Avenue Special Services District Director, should defend the rezoning proposal that his organization is sponsoring and promoting. However, it does not further the conversation to set up and demolish strawmen, to counter statements of evident fact with hyperbolic cries of "[n]othing could be further from the truth," or to dismiss legitimate questions and concerns about the proposal as arising from ignorance rather than careful study of the proposal and consideration of its potential consequences.

As for statements of fact, for example, Mr. Foley oddly says it is "simply not the case" that 300-foot buildings will be permitted in one of the new zones. In the very next paragraph he acknowledges that "the new ordinance does permit widely spaced small-footprint residential buildings up to 300 feet high."

Mr. Foley's strawman argument is that people object to any rezoning of the portions of the district that are currently zoned CO, and he finds it necessary to recite for the thousandth time the arguments about the tired office buildings in the zone. In fact, if thoughtful rezoning of the area had been proposed, probably no one would object to its adoption.

Mr. Foley claims that the Roadway Sufficiency Analysis contains detailed recommendations for traffic-impact mitigation so we should just stop worrying about it and put the new zones in place without further consideration. However, the Transportation Capital Improvements Plan for implementing these mitigating measures has not been produced and will not be for some time. Much



of the concern about hurrying the new ordinance to enactment centers on the issue of traffic improvements and how to pay for them. One only needs to look at the failed intersections on Rock Hill Road, at Belmont Avenue on one end and at Conshohocken State Road at the other, to understand how inappropriate it is to base promises of future improvements to keep traffic moving on illusory funding schemes that turn out to be nothing more than a will-o'-the-wisp. A similar scheme like the one proposed for City Avenue was adopted for Rock Hill Road in the form of a "Rock Hill Road Transportation Services Area." Years later, nothing has been built and the money for the intersection improvements that was supposed to be in PennDOT's budget has disappeared. At this point, if any improvements are ever to be made, they most likely will be on the township's nickel.

Mr. Foley similarly misunderstands the purpose of comprehensive planning, both by the county and the municipality. He talks about the Montgomery County Comprehensive Plan, to which he assigns vastly exaggerated weight and importance, as if it were a substitute for an updated Lower Merion Comprehensive Plan, which it surely is not. In fact the enabling legislation for comprehensive plans, the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code (the MPC), states clearly in Article III, section 306(a):

"When a municipality having a comprehensive plan is located in a county which has adopted a com-

prehensive plan, both the county and the municipality shall each give the plan of the other consideration in order that the objectives of each plan can be protected to the greatest extent possible."

Thus if Lower Merion had updated its comprehensive plan, it just might be that the community vision for the township did not include 300-foot buildings in any part of the township and that objective would have been given great deference by the county.

In reality Montgomery County planners recognized in the Vision Statement for the County Comprehensive Plan that with a projected growth in traffic countywide of 50-70 percent by 2025, "if roads aren't improved, if more people don't take public transit, if more people don't live closer to work, if work hours don't continue to become more flexible, if more people don't work at home – then many of the county's busiest roads [read City Avenue] will barely function for much of the day while other previously uncongested roads will suddenly be jammed with heavy traffic." This prophecy rings particularly true for the City Avenue rezoning at issue here – with the zoning change that is as massive as the one being considered, there is absolutely no proposal for any new or out-of-the-box form of public transportation, such as a light-rail link, that would relieve the load on local rail and bus lines not to mention local roads.

The crux of the matter is that the suggested traffic-mitigation measures would cost tens of millions of dollars and no funding mechanism for them has been proposed that would actually insure they would be built. Mr. Foley papers over this very real problem with pie-in-the-sky-projections for an influx of private, federal and state funds that, as on Rock Hill Road, probably never will materialize.

While the rezoning proposal includes charging impact fees to the developers, these fees will (according to the traffic engineer who prepared the Roadway Sufficiency Analysis) cover at most only 15 percent of the costs. It should be noted that these mitigation measures would be needed even if this rezoning proposal weren't on the table because of the projected growth in background traffic alone – not related to the rezoning – to which traffic-impact fees charged to developers will not apply.

Mr. Foley and his organization should take a hard look at the Rock Hill Road Transportation Services Area, the lack of any improvements made there and the already existing traffic problems on City Avenue, and then think carefully about whether gridlock at City Avenue and the Schuylkill Expressway, or City Avenue at Belmont Avenue, Monument Road, Conshohocken State Road or Righters Ferry Road, is really going to offer an attractive environment for potential office occupants or for new residents of this potentially calamitous, in terms of impacts on the entire township, megalopolis.

The following Lower Merion Township residents have signed this column: Karen Ayd, Gladwyne; Hugh B. Gordon, North Ardmore; Chad Grinham, North Ardmore; Perry Hamilton, Wynnewood; Walter M. Herman, M.D., Merion Station; Joan Hindin, Wynnewood; Vivian Lapes, Merion Station; Karla Moras, Merion Station; Michael Seiden, Merion Station; Teri R. Simon, Wynnewood; Carole Strickland, Wynnewood; Greg Strickland, Belmont Hills; Steven M. Tonkovich, Gladwyne; Carl Watson, Wynnewood; Tom West, Merion Station; and Hank Wilson, Bryn Mawr.