

MAIN LINE TIMES

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Traffic impacts on City Avenue to be studied by Cheryl Allison

While Lower Merion commissioners won't resume substantive public hearings on new zoning for the City Avenue corridor until this fall, that doesn't mean the topic is on summer hiatus entirely.

In an important related initiative, a hearing is scheduled this month in a process that will assess the traffic impacts of potential new development and redevelopment in the area.

On July 13 beginning at 6 p.m., a township committee will hear public comment on a report that projects how much and what types of development may occur in the study area over the next 20 years. The hearing will be held at the Township Building, 75 E. Lancaster Ave., Ardmore.

Late last year, recognizing that the zoning under consideration would permit significantly more intensive development along City Avenue in Lower Merion that could also require costly road and traffic improvements, the board of commissioners chose to determine if establishment of a City Avenue Transportation Services Area is feasible.

That is the same process it followed a decade or more ago for the Rock Hill/Belmont Avenue corridor, eyeing redevelopment in that area. In a transportation-services area, developers can be assessed impact fees to cover up to 50 percent of the costs of future road improvements.

A City Avenue Transportation Services Area Advisory Committee was appointed, whose members include representatives from the City Avenue Special Services District, commercial property owners and representatives of local civic associations.

One of the initial steps in considering a transportation-services area is preparation of a Land Use Assumptions Report, which assesses the extent of future development. Based on this report, a Roadway Sufficiency Analysis — a comprehensive traffic study — would then be performed. Ultimately the analysis would lead to the development of a transportation capital-improvement plan for the district.

At the July 13 hearing, the draft Land Use Assumptions Report will be presented. After the hearing, the TSAAC will adopt a final report.

In the report, the current and future land uses in the corridor are described as accommodating “regional market demands” for commercial office and retail and residential uses as well as educational institutions.

Under the new zoning, however, there would be an emphasis on mixed-use development, more pedestrian-oriented streetscapes and forms of development, and better integration of transit to reduce the area's historic dependence on automobile traffic.

Based on current development plans, interviews with major landowners regarding their future plans and the provisions of the proposed zoning ordinance, the report projects development over the next 20 years, broken down into five-year periods.

And, based on the information that was gathered, the report notes, the amount of development it foresees is actually less than what would be permitted with full build-out under the proposed zoning.

For development in the latter part of the study period, it comes up with estimates under two scenarios, one assuming a 50/50 split of office and residential development, and one shifting the split to 70-percent office, 30-percent residential.

Development is also broken down into the two separate areas proposed in the ordinance: a Regional Center Area east of Conshohocken State Road and a Bala Village district extending north along Bala Avenue to Montgomery Avenue.

In a summary, it projects over 20 years a total of nearly 3.4 million more square feet of building area in the Regional Center Area and about 288,000 square feet in the Bala Village district for a combined total of 3.66 million square feet.

The report includes a couple of important caveats. If the advisory committee approves these land-use assumptions, that “does not necessarily mean the TSAAC endorses the proposed new City Avenue zoning ordinance for Lower Merion.”

Also, “if the ensuing traffic report shows an unacceptable level of additional traffic based on the land-use assumptions made in this report, the assumptions and extent of development may need to be revisited” — in other words scaled back.

Copies of the Land Use Assumptions Report are available now for the public to review both at the Township Building and online at www.lowermerion.org. (Look for the City Avenue prompt.)