

Two sketch plans OK'd for BC Shopping Center

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Public discussions have begun in earnest in Lower Merion Township this summer about rezoning of properties on its side of City Avenue in Merion and Bala Cynwyd, but it could be deep into winter before an ordinance comes to a vote.

That's too long to wait and too uncertain for the owners of a key piece of real estate in that corridor.

The board of commissioners last week approved two alternative tentative sketch plans for redevelopment of part of the Bala Cynwyd Shopping Center under the current zoning.

Presented as by-right plans that meet all existing regulations, the plans focus on the eastern part of the shopping center, including the landmark Lord & Taylor department store, a noted example of mid-20th century modernist architecture.

Federal Realty Investment Trust (FRIT), which owns the center, asked for approval of both plans for flexibility to meet market demands.

Introducing the proposals to the board's Building and Planning Committee earlier this month, Assistant Planning Director Chris Leswing put it this way:

"Tonight you're going to see what will happen if zoning doesn't change," he said.

He was talking about a pattern of development that perpetuates the corridor's decades-old automobile-driven, commercial focus.

The zoning ordinance under consideration now for Lower Merion's part of the City Avenue Special Services District and Bala Avenue shopping district would permit higher-density, mixed-use development designed to be a more walkable, 24-hour live-work-shop environment. The City of Philadelphia has already adopted new zoning with similar goals on its side of the street.

Anticipating changes, FRIT some time ago had created a plan for redevelopment that would conform with the new zoning, as it has been presented in draft form. That concept envisions a mix of retail and residential uses in multi-story buildings.

But because the process to bring the zoning proposal forward in Lower Merion has taken so long, it also

explored alternatives under existing zoning. Its representatives have told township officials they want to be in a position to respond to “changing real-estate conditions.”

In fact, for flexibility, FRIT’s request included three options when the matter first came before Lower Merion’s planning commission in March.

The applications were tabled at that time, when planners learned that the plans had not yet been presented to the area’s civic association, the Neighborhood Club of Bala Cynwyd. The commission was also hesitant to recommend approval of such an unusual array of possibilities, leaving the community uncertain as to what development might occur.

In the intervening months, FRIT has dropped one of the options — as it happens, the plan that called for the least changes and the only one that would have left the Lord & Taylor store intact.

That left it with a Plan A and Plan B as follows:

-- Plan A calls for removal of a rectangular “bump-out” on the front of Lord & Taylor and construction of two new free-standing buildings in the front parking lot. One would be a 4,025-square-foot bank with three drive-through teller windows; the other a 9,000-square foot commercial/retail building.

-- Plan B calls for “squaring off” Lord & Taylor by demolishing much of its front. That would bring the façade in line with other stores in the shopping strip. The space between the department store and Acme would be filled in with a new 4,500-square-foot store. In Plan B, the bank building also would be built along with a larger, 31,500-square-foot commercial/retail building closer to Lord & Taylor along Belmont Avenue.

Both plans call for stormwater-management systems in the area of the improvements as well as reconfiguration of the parking lot and traffic access from Belmont Avenue and City Avenue. New planted islands would go in the parking lot.

In revisions from the March plans, the bank has been moved closer to City Avenue while the drive-through lanes have been shifted to the rear. That is a bow to the goals of rezoning, which seeks to improve the City Avenue streetscape and prohibit drive-through operations.

There was general agreement that the proposed plans would improve conditions at the center, especially the confusing traffic patterns at the eastern end. But the planning commission, when it reviewed the revised plans recently, wanted to see more done to redesign the shopping center’s main entrance across from 47th Street.

The property’s owners, though, were reluctant to commit to making changes beyond the scope of the current plans. At their request, the board agreed to revise a condition of approval that the planning commission had recommended.

Rather than stating that the main-entrance drive “shall be improved” by channeling traffic farther into the parking lot, the revised condition states that the main-entrance drive “shall be evaluated for improvement” at the next phase of land development, when a study of traffic conditions will have been done. The applicant accepted a number of other conditions of approval.

With that, the board voted to approve both plans, even as more than one remarked that, depending on the outcome of rezoning, “this may all go away.”

“I am massively unenthusiastic about any of this,” commented board President Bruce Reed, whose ward includes neighboring areas. “But this is a by-right application. Hopefully it’s an interim step.”