

Main Line Times

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Vision for City Avenue topic of LM workshops

By CHERYL ALLISON

In an ordinance proposing new zoning for Lower Merion's prime office and commercial corridor along City Avenue in Bala Cynwyd, there are sections and sub-sections on items such as floor-area ratios, build-to lines, impervious surface coverage and building heights.

Before township officials begin considering such technical but potentially high-impact factors, though, there's something that should come first: a vision of how the area should eventually redevelop.

That was the recurring remark at a workshop discussion of the legislation Monday at the Township Building, coming from residential neighbors, planning-commission members and township commissioners alike.

It's an indication that the principles and goals of the new zoning, legislation that has

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been in the works for more than two years but only recently presented in detail at township meetings, are not yet clear to many in the community.

The late-afternoon meeting, which was carried live and will be rebroadcast on the township's cable channels, was intended to be a less formal venue for discussion than the public hearing process that has just gotten under way. More such sessions are planned, focusing on specific topics and components of the ordinance.

And to that end, there seemed to be general agreement that the format would be helpful.

Participating in this meeting were members of residential neighborhoods abutting the proposed zoning districts and the Neighborhood Club of Bala Cynwyd, representatives of the City Avenue Special Services District, commercial property owners and the planning consultant that drafted the ordinance.

Recognizing the complexity of the legislation, which proposes two zoning districts, a higher-density Regional Center district closer to the Schuylkill River and a Bala Village district focusing on the Bala Avenue business district, Bala Cynwyd Commissioner George Manos said it may be several months before the ordinance comes to a vote.

But also stressing the urgency of changes for the corridor, Manos asked the group to keep the process moving forward.

The ordinance is part of an effort to look comprehensively and in a coordinated way at zoning on both sides of City Avenue. Philadelphia adopted a new overlay district for properties on its side last summer.

In general terms, the Lower Merion component seeks to lay the groundwork for redevelopment of what has been described as a tired, outdated automobile-dependent office-park environment as a modern, mixed-use, more pedestrian- and transit-oriented, live-workshop-play environment.

Increased density of development would be focused in some areas, with buffer areas adjoining residential neighborhoods. Building-height limits would be increased in some areas, to as much as 300 feet or 30 stories in a few locations.

At the workshop, Terrence Foley, executive director of the City Avenue Special Services District, explained why the mid-20th-century model on which the commercial areas were developed no longer works. Buildings are older and not amenable to the technology and space needs of business tenants who are looking instead at office complexes in other areas, Foley said. Existing zoning is relatively low-density, leaving the area currently built-out.

Yet Foley stressed that City Avenue has great strengths, primarily its location and its existing strong institutions focusing on health and education, as well as the availability of bus and rail transportation. With updated zoning, "I think we could win the battle with Conshohocken and King of Prussia," he said.

Manos and others stressed that the ordinance is in "preliminary" form. Through the hearing, and now

workshop, process, "that gives us a chance to turn it over ... and look at it from all sides," he said.

However, while the legislation addresses many components of a very different model of development, workshop participants kept coming back to the same concern Anne Greenhaugh, president of the Neighborhood Club, expressed: "What do we want this corridor to look like?"

"We're all struggling with the vision," said Robert Gray, co-chairman of Lower Merion's planning commission. "How would this [zoning language] manifest itself in a portion of the township?"

Gray was interested in an option that Commissioner Liz Rogan said was possible under Pennsylvania law, though she said it has never been done. That is adoption of what's referred to as a "specific plan": a kind of master plan of development adopted along with a zoning ordinance.

Other immediate concerns were the impacts of added density — especially increased traffic — and, in some cases, dramatically increased building height.

For Roger Moog, a Neighborhood Club board member and traffic engineer by profession, traffic is an issue that should be tackled first and foremost. "We all feel there is a new look needed on City Avenue, but the problem relates to more density. The ordinance has a level that is huge," Moog said. "The roadway system is sometimes at capacity now," he went on to say. "To go forward with the ordinance as drafted without having a traffic analysis

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NEIGHBORHOOD CLUB OF BALA CYNWYD BOARD MEMBER

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Even with road improvements, "I think we are above that level [of increased capacity] with what's in the ordinance now," Moog said.

Manos said potential traffic impacts are being analyzed as part of a process to consider creating a Transportation Services Area for the corridor, which might result in developer fees to fund road improvements.

Township Building and Planning Director Bob Duncan said he was looking for feedback in the workshops to the question of building height. "Assuming we can set the density appropriately, are the height regulations" — including towers up to 300 feet — "something the community can accept?"

David Haas, another member of the Neighborhood Club board, said the height issue is "to some extent a red herring."

"There are specifics we can't know yet.... There may be places where it's OK, but it depends on how much of a parcel is taken up," he suggested. "If [the tower] had a large public area, that might be an attraction."

But Haas also said he's not reassured the zoning will achieve its goals. Incentives of increased height are provided in the ordinance for such features as mixed-use buildings, green roofs and underground or "wrapped" parking. But will developers just opt for lower, single-use buildings? "Maybe what's as of right should be ratcheted back to give a real incentive," Haas remarked.

The City Avenue zoning discussion will continue on two tracks, Manos said. The next session in a continued public hearing is scheduled for June 23 at 6:30 p.m. at the Township Building.