

PLANNING COMMISSION WORKSHOP MEETING NOTES

October 18, 2010

The Planning Commission Workshop on the Issues Report convened at approximately 7:05 p.m. on Monday, October 18, 2010. Present were Commission members Bob Gray, Alan Ritterband, Brian O’Leary, Tony Vale, Brian Hirsch, and Laura Shell. Township staff present included Bob Duncan, Director of Building and Planning, Chris Leswing, Assistant Director of Building and Planning, Colleen Hall, Planner and GIS Technician, and Carissa Koll-Hazelton, Planning Technician.

Planning Commission Public Workshop

Mr. Ritterband opened the meeting and thanked members of the public for coming. Mr. Ritterband stated that the first order of business was to approve the meeting notes from the September 21st Issues Report Workshop.

Mr. O’Leary stated that page two of the meeting notes should be revised in regards to the reference to the long form census data. Mr. O’Leary stated that long form information will not be coming out. Instead the data will be based on the American Community Surveys. Mr. O’Leary stated that subject to the amendment he would like to make a motion to approve the meeting notes.

Mr. Vale seconded the motion.

All in favor voted “aye”. None were opposed.

Mr. Ritterband stated that the next topic of the evening is a follow up on the September workshop.

Mr. Leswing stated that there seems to be some confusion regarding the Issues Report. Mr. Leswing stated that this document is not the Comprehensive Plan. It is the first step in completing a Comprehensive Plan. It is meant to be an educational tool to help the public participate more fully in the planning process. The Issues Report is the text book or background material needed to complete a Comprehensive Plan. Mr. Leswing stated that staff tried to gather everyone’s issues and weave them together. This document provides information on zoning and planning efforts that have been undertaken within the past several years. Mr. Leswing stated this report tries to summarize the major issues and innovative solutions that have been tried in the past. The report is meant to help public officials decide what the Comprehensive Plan should contain and prioritize the order of the elements. The Planning Commission is charged with determining what order the elements should proceed in.

Mr. Leswing stated that this document is consistent with other planning documents; however, it is different because it is in a binder. The reason it is in a binder is because it is not finished. This document is the starting point; not the end. Mr. Leswing stated that at the previous meeting Ms. Shell asked if there are overriding principles in the Comprehensive Plan documents. Mr. Leswing stated that this evening he’d like to spend some time talking about the Open Space plan and the principles that have already been adopted.

Overview

Mr. Leswing stated that this process has been underway for a couple of years. Mr. Leswing stated that in 2008 a Community Map was provided to each household in the Township explaining the comprehensive

planning process. Bookmarks with recommended readings were also distributed at each of the Township libraries. The Township website has also been continually updated throughout this process to keep the public informed of the progress. Mr. Leswing explained that this Comprehensive Plan will be different from most. Typically Comprehensive Plans are prepared to direct new growth in undeveloped communities, but since the Township is primarily built out the Comprehensive Plan will focus on preservation, infill and redevelopment.

Mr. Leswing stated that in 2006 the Open Space Plan was adopted as an element of the Comprehensive Plan. Mr. Leswing stated that he would like to talk about principles a little bit. The Open Space Plan highlighted four principles. The first was prudence: making more with less. The second was synergy: finding joint solutions to complex issues. The Linwood Park bump out served the dual purpose of physically narrowing the road to slow the speed of traffic and providing stormwater management in the form of a rain garden. It illustrates a good way to be creative. The third principle is connectivity: integrating resources into a comprehensive network and connecting to the regional system. The fourth principle is cooperation: partnering with governmental and community groups. Mr. Leswing stated that this is a community plan and Lower Merion Township is fortunate to have excellent social networking.

Mr. Leswing stated that he would also like to discuss the Livability Principles that have been established by the Partnership for Sustainable Communities. Mr. Leswing stated that these principles speak to the desire for a theme of sustainability. The Livability Principles include: 1) providing transportation choices; 2) promote equitable, affordable housing; 3) enhancing economic competitiveness; 4) supporting existing communities; 5) coordinating policies and leveraging investment; and 6) valuing communities and neighborhoods.

The following comments and questions were raised regarding the overview:

- **Who are the Planning Commission members and what role do they play in the preparation of a Comprehensive Plan?**

The Planning Commission members were introduced. The Planning Commission is an advisory body made up of residents appointed by the Board of Commissioners. According to the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code the Planning Commission is the body charged with the preparation of a Comprehensive Plan. This is the advisory body that will be coordinating all the public meetings for the Comprehensive Plan.

- **What does the term “infill” mean?**

Infill development is new construction within the existing community fabric. Lower Merion Township is pretty much fully developed. There are a few sites left for new development scattered throughout the Township. There are also a few residential properties that may be subdivided for the construction of additional homes in the existing neighborhood development pattern. Infill may have a greater immediate impact on adjacent property owners. The Township can't stop infill development but there may be creative solutions to mitigate the impact of infill development.

- **Cooperation seems more like a recommendation that tells how the government should regulate itself rather than a principle.**

Staff is providing a list of principles for discussion. If there are different principles that the Planning Commission would like to set forth they are invited to share their ideas.

- **What does it mean to value communities and neighborhoods?**

It means to value those quality of life things that are often looked at as discretionary.

- **These principles sound like motherhood and apple pie. Who would be against them? How will we actually be able to use these principles to support the community at this point in time in Lower Merion Township?**

Understanding the principles at a broad level is important. It is a challenge is to create a document that is overarching enough to be inclusive but to still give options. The principles will hold it all together once it boils down to the specific recommendations. The recommendations are fairly well detailed.

- **Could the guiding principles be based upon enhancing the quality of life?**

One of the reasons that people choose to live in Lower Merion Township is the high quality of life offered here. If such a guiding principle was adopted, then the onus would be on the developer to tell us how their project is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan. It will help the Planning Commission to evaluate applications and promote a vibrant quality of life.

- **Does the Planning Commission want to include principles in this document?**

Options help to crystallize where the Planning Commission would like to send the overall plan. It is important to ask not only what the desired outcomes are but also to determine what is being implicitly rejected.

- **Commissioner Gordon requested that the recommendations in the Comprehensive Plan be explicit and clear. Commissioner Gordon stated that he would like the recommendations to have teeth. The Comprehensive Plan will be a reflection of the community and the recommendations should be clear so the Comprehensive Plan can be used to tell whether or not projects are in line with the community's desires.**

- **How can the Comprehensive Plan be used? Could the Township require that the Zoning Code be consistent with the Comprehensive Plan?**

The Comprehensive Plan is not just about land development. It's designed to provide guidance for the entire Township. It is an opportunity for the community to come together and identify community goals. The Comprehensive Plan is an advisory document, but triggers should be put into place so that it is not just followed when it's convenient. There is an opportunity to make sure that zoning and land development are consistent with the Comprehensive Plan; however, the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code ("MPC") does not require the Zoning Code to be consistent with the Comprehensive Plan.

Circulation Element

Mr. Leswing stated that last month the Housing Element was the main topic of discussion and tonight the focus will be directed to the Circulation Element. Mr. Leswing explained the basis for the initial recommendations contained in the Issues Report. Mr. Leswing stated that staff reviewed the changes and the trends that occurred since the 1979 Comprehensive Plan was prepared. Staff also reviewed the major issues and objectives of the 1979 Comprehensive Plan and the impact of long range regional plans on Lower Merion Township. Mr. Leswing stated that changes have also been made to the MPC that provides the legislative basis for the Township's rules and regulations.

Mr. Leswing stated that a significant change since the 1979 Comprehensive Plan is the amount of growth in the western suburbs. This growth has impacted the Township's roadway network. Mr. Leswing stated that in the Analysis section of the Issues Report staff also reviewed how land development activity and Zoning Code amendments affected the circulation system. Mr. Leswing stated that the creation of the Mixed-Use Special Transportation District and the Rock Hill Overlay District (ROHO) oriented new development and growth to existing transportation facilities.

Mr. Leswing explained that although ROHO is not located near regional rail lines it is oriented to the car. A part of the new overlay involved better designing the roadway to accommodate cars. A part of the existing bottleneck situation in the area is due to the design of the roadways. Mr. Leswing stated that ROHO was created to encourage a mix of uses to reduce dependency on the automobile. Mr. Leswing stated that a Transportation Services Area was also established in this area so that developers have to pay for a part of the costs of necessary roadway improvements resulting from new development.

Mr. Leswing stated that there has been a significant in regards to the locations of the employment centers and where people are living. Mr. Leswing explained that the Township will procure a consultant for the Circulation Element and explained the initial recommendations.

The following comments and questions were raised regarding the Circulation Element:

- **There has been an increase in traffic and the Circulation Element should identify how to manage traffic better. Managing traffic is the biggest issue.**
- **It is concerning to look at the long term plans which seem to overlook the smaller solutions that can be accomplished today. For example, the traffic lights at 63rd Street and City Avenue are out of sync every day. This is a problem that could be improved immediately.**

The challenge with some roadway improvements is that certain roadways, such as City Avenue, fall into PennDOT's jurisdiction.

- **It seems that at the most basic level the community members must determine what is desired of Lower Merion Township before the issue of Circulation may be discussed in any meaningful way. Do residents want to see Lower Merion become more like a King of Prussia or should it remain as a bedroom community?**

A part of this process was to evaluate what actions have been taken that impacts the character of the community. Now is the time to start prioritizing goals as a community.

- **Would it be possible to come up with alternative scenarios that could illustrate what the community may look like if it is kept as it is, if it becomes like King of Prussia or if it becomes something in between? Planning Commission members advocated for scenarios to be considered as they help people to decide what needs to be done.**

If scenarios are done it must be recognized that they cannot be done in a vacuum. On City Avenue, for example, there are office spaces deteriorating and tenants are moving outside the Township for newer office spaces. If nothing changes the area may not look like it does today in ten years due to deteriorating conditions.

- **It seems that the cart is coming before the horse. What are the themes? What are the overarching goals? It seems that everything else should flow from the identified themes or the overarching principles which would provide a conceptual framework for the Comprehensive Plan.**

Everyone is on the right track. The Issues Report was meant to put the issues on the table. The vision will come from that. If the vision is to stimulate additional commercial development and higher density residences around the transit centers then we need to ask what needs to be done to support that vision. If that is the vision then the Circulation Element can determine what needs to be done in order to support that vision. It may be that create a pedestrian network to support the commercial centers will become a high priority.

This Issues Report is in essence a Scope of Work for the Comprehensive Plan Elements. It doesn't have the goals and principles that the Planning Commission is recommending, but goals and principles can be added to each recommendation. This is a work plan that will help to determine what will be in the Comprehensive Plan.

- **How has Narberth managed to thrive despite the regional shift to the western suburbs and the development of the King of Prussia Mall?**
- **The busing system is completely misaligned. The routes that are serving Lower Merion Township have serendipitous routes through the neighborhood making them completely ineffective. Additionally, buses stop at nearly every single intersection which contributes to congestion.**
- **There should be long haul bus routes and jitneys to handle the shorter routes.**

This process needs to be simpler. The things that can be done immediately should be included in the plan.

Circulation Element: Official Highway Map

Mr. Leswing stated that one of the initial recommendations (C-21) indicates that the existing Official Highway Map and classification of all roadways be analyzed in the Circulation Element. Mr. Leswing stated that the Official Highway Map ("Map") serves as a guide for decisions pertaining to capital improvements, subdivision and locations and overall street network maintenance. The Map also pertains to uses permitted in the Zoning Code.

Mr. Leswing explained the classifications of the roadways. Mr. Leswing stated that the main idea for the hierarchical roadway system was that the majority of people would live on quiet residential streets. Traffic from these streets would funnel up. Mr. Leswing stated that one reason it is difficult to cut through residential neighborhoods is because it was designed to deter cut-through traffic. Mr. Leswing stated that another important feature of the roadway classification system was the inclusion of pedestrian ways to connect neighborhoods to the arterial streets and commercial areas. Mr. Leswing stated that in 1936 pedestrian ways were laid out to connect to a future pedestrian network along the roadway, but along the way the pedestrian network was broken. Street trees were also originally part of the street network Mr. Leswing stated that it is difficult to a sidewalk network back in.

Mr. Leswing stated that the Official Highway Map separates roadways into five major categories: 1) Freeways are regional routes connecting major population centers and carrying high volumes of traffic for considerable distances at maximum safe speed; 2) Primary Arterials function as through routes linking local regions with each other and with points of access to expressways, carrying heavy flow of traffic, but with controlled access; 3) Secondary Arterials, which are feeder streets linking local communities, connect neighborhoods to primary arterials; 4) Tertiary Streets connect local neighborhoods and minor roads to secondary system, not intended to carry through traffic except to nearest secondary arterial; and 5) Minor Streets, which are local routes designed primarily to give access to abutting properties; not intended to carry through traffic.

Mr. Leswing stated that as roadways are classified it is important to ask whether the goal is quality of life and livability or if it is efficiency. Mr. Leswing showed a map illustrating the different speed limits throughout the Township and explained that it is important to understand how the traffic flows. Traffic is not going to stop and it needs to go somewhere. Mr. Leswing stated that there may be physical designs that, implemented over a long range period can be completed to tie the roadway networks together again.

The following comments and questions were raised regarding the Official Highway Map and roadway classifications:

- **A 20 year projection today is very difficult to do and the chances of being accurate are pretty slim. The timelines for the Circulation Element should be shorter.**

Long range projections will be wrong. It's a question of how wrong. Right now along City Avenue as a part of the Transportation Service Area a Roadway Sufficiency Analysis is being prepared that will include several different scenarios. A similar approach could be taken with the Comprehensive Plan. Out of all this a series of priorities may be formed.

- **The Circulation Element has to take into consideration that the Schuylkill Expressway (I-76) is possibly the worst main artery ever. No one wants to drive on the Schuylkill which is why the Township has so much cut through traffic.**
- **The Circulation Element should not overlook the impact of the freeways. There is presently a question of whether or not to widen the Schuylkill Expressway at the regional level.**
- **The Circulation Element should include an inventory and analysis of alleys in the Township.**

- **How do street trees affect traffic?**

Street trees are intended to be located between the roadway and the sidewalk. They are designed to provide a shaded canopy and a buffer for pedestrians. When there are regularly spaced obstructions drivers will go slower; the more a roadway is consciously narrowed the slower people will go. When street pavement is widened and the right-of-way is not it is oftentimes the street trees that are sacrificed. Without a buffer between the sidewalk and the roadway the pedestrian environment is uncomfortable. Street trees are legally defined as trees in the right-of-way.

Circulation Element: Case Study, One less Car

Mr. Leswing stated that the presentation would end with a case study of an area of the Township that is presently auto-oriented despite the availability of public transportation. Mr. Leswing stated that if more individuals would utilize public transportation then congestion on the roadways may decrease. Mr. Leswing stated that if the community establishes a goal of encouraging more pedestrian activity and the use of multiple modes of transportation one policy that may be established is the requirement to provide sidewalks.

Mr. Leswing stated that over the course of the past couple years land development applications were submitted for separate properties that are in proximity to the Bala Station. Mr. Leswing showed a graphic of the area that showed the location of existing sidewalks and explained that there are gaps in the sidewalk network in Bala Cynwyd. When each application was reviewed individually it seemed impractical in some ways to require the property owner to install a sidewalk that would lead to “nowhere”. However, if each application had installed a sidewalk in conjunction with the land development application, there would be a complete sidewalk network that would lead from the regional rail line to the major employment centers such as the Bala Cynwyd Shopping Center and 3 Bala Plaza.

- **Has the Bike Share phenomenon been explored? It seems that such a program may work at 1, 2 or 3 Bala Plaza.**

The Township previously looked at Car Share and the companies that run the programs determined that the Township did not have the density needed to successfully run a program such as Car Share. The Township has not explored bike share programs.

- **The Township needs a jitney service that would run to and from the Bala Station to the major employment center at 1, 2 and 3 Bala Plaza and the Bala Cynwyd Shopping Center. People won't take the train if they have a long walk from the station to work.**

- **It would be great to have a map when reviewing the recommendations in the Issues Report to see where all the institutions are, since they are large traffic generators.**

The Community Map that was completed in 2008 in conjunction with this Report shows where all of the institutions are as well as the location of all of the regional rail lines and roadways. It is available free of charge in the Township Administration Building.

- **Another thought in terms of the one less car is to consider including a recommendation that when institutions are expanding that they be mandated to require that students carpool and that certain numbers of staff and students take transit.**

Initial recommendations C-24 through C-26 address this.

C-24: Examine opportunities to create incentives for institutions to implement innovative transportation programs to encourage carpooling, the increased use of mass transit, bicycling or walking.

C-25: Consider ways to reduce traffic congestion by working with institutions by providing shuttles and other alternative modes of transportation similar to Saint Joseph's University.

C-26: Inventory existing and potential private transportation arrangements, such as Saint Joseph's University student shuttles and the Haverford College and Bryn Mawr College Blue Bus, with the goal of assisting institutions in maximizing these resources.

- **A recommendation should be included to encourage the use of sidewalks that are already there. For example, as the Lower Merion High School "Walk Zones" were established kids who used to be able to walk are now going to be bussed to the other side of the community.**

An initial recommendation is to analyze the "Walk Zones".

C-32: Analyze the "Walk Zones" established by the Lower Merion School District as a means to prioritize pedestrian improvement projects.

- **Research completed by the Lower Merion School District revealed that in 1919 the Pencoyd, Mt. Pleasant and Fairview public schools closed because busses were purchased by the school district. The use of busses allowed the Lower Merion School District to close the smaller, neighborhood schools since students no longer had to walk.**
- **Has the Township completed any survey of private schools and/or colleges and universities regarding where people are coming from?**

As a part of this process staff completed numerous stakeholder interviews and obtained some of that information. It may be something to expand upon as the elements of the Comprehensive Plan are developed. It's a part of this whole process.

- **What are the "designated growth areas" referred to in recommendation C-6?**

C-6: Explore the capacity of the designated growth areas to absorb new growth and what, if any, transportation improvements are necessary to absorb such growth. The Circulation Element should identify potential private and public funding necessary to fund growth related improvements.

The Montgomery County Comprehensive Plan designated the areas of Ardmore, Bryn Mawr and City Avenue as designated growth areas. The studies that have already been completed with these areas are proposed to be incorporated into the Comprehensive Plan.

- **How will the sale of O'Neil's property along Rock Hill Road affect roadway improvements in that area?**

Someone could develop what has been approved.

Mr. Ritterband thanked everyone for coming and drew the meeting to a close at approximately 9:25 p.m.

Meeting notes recorded by Carissa Koll-Hazelton, Planning Technician