

Lower Merion Township Zoning Code

Stakeholder Interview Issue Summary

July 14, 2017

As part of our work assessing the needs for changes to the Lower Merion zoning and land development codes, the project consulting team conducted several one-on-one and small group stakeholder interviews in March and May. The goal of these interviews was to understand stakeholders' visions for opportunities for the Township's future and the barriers in the current code to reaching those visions. To encourage open and honest discussion, stakeholders were promised confidentiality, and Township staff were not present during interviews, except in cases where Township staff themselves were being interviewed. Stakeholders interviewed including people with a variety of interests, including (in no particular order):

- Affordable housing
- Civically active residents
- Commercial areas
- Development interests
- Elected officials
- Environmental organizations
- Infrastructure (transportation and stormwater)
- Institutions
- Neighbors of institutions
- People with substantial experience with current codes (land use attorneys, current and/or former chairs and/or members of ZHB, PC, and EAC)
- Small business
- Youth and school issues

From these interviews, the consulting team heard a variety of issues and concerns related to zoning and development codes. Highlights related to key issues are summarized below. **These highlights simply reflect what we heard in the interviews: the consulting team has not independently verified these statements, and they do not necessarily represent broad consensus.** We have noted where we heard **directly conflicting opinions from different stakeholders.**

Community Identity

- LMT residents have a strong attachment to the "village character" of the area.

Traffic and Streets

- Concerns about traffic congestion and growth of traffic are major drivers of anti-development sentiment.
- Data shows that a large portion of traffic increases over the last 20 years is related to regional development patterns (more development in farther suburbs) and people commuting through LMT. Local development is not responsible for most of the increased traffic.
- Large areas of the Township, including near schools, have no sidewalks.
- Differing Comp Plan and School District growth projections complicate traffic projections.

Water Resources

- Regulations should be updated to include more consistent and better protections for key natural features, including the newest, and most rigorous, storm water design standards and more protection for steep slopes, wetlands, and flood plains, potentially using stronger “net out” provisions.
- Impervious coverage regulations sometimes prevent even minor improvements to people’s homes.

Land Use: Natural Environment Protections

- In lower density residential zones, natural environment standards are more important than the built environment standards for maintaining neighborhood character.
- Fear of impact/loss of natural features (slopes, wetlands, trees) drives the desire for better protection.
- Tree protection measures should be considered.

Land Use: Residential Development

- There is a strong desire to protect the existing design character of low-density residential neighborhoods in the western portion of the Township.
- Some neighborhoods have unique design features that should be protected. New development should be compatible in design and materials with existing development.
- Some aspects of the current regulations, such as method of regulating height and restrictions on side yard projections, encourage builders to maximize the “box.”
- Private streets and cul-de-sacs should be required to be built to the same standards as public streets.
- There are currently substantial restrictions on accessory dwelling units.

- Some stakeholders expressed support for increased residential density near train stations; other stakeholders expressed concern about any increased density due to traffic and pressure on schools.

Land Use: Commercial Development

- There is a desire for commercial areas to improve in quality to live up to the great character of residential areas.
- Where should the code call for more walkable development, and where should the code allow auto-oriented commercial development to remain?
- The current code is more supportive of auto-oriented retail development.
- Some places that currently have walkable retail development have a public realm that is not supportive. For example, the public realm in downtown Ardmore has sidewalks that are too narrow with no room for street trees.
- Shared parking provisions in the code need improvement, and walkable commercial areas need “park once” options. Even in auto-oriented retail areas, the code should encourage connections between parking lots.
- There is a need for additional parking in some commercial areas.
- Commercial district overlays need significant revamping.
- Split lot zoning requires correction.

Land Use: Institutions

- LMT has a wealth of institutions that play a major role in the local economy.
- There is no one “model” for the built form or operating needs of institutions. Any regulatory framework has to accommodate the variety of institutions in the Township.
- Institutions have a need to change and grow. Competition among institutions places real pressures on them to upgrade facilities.
- Neighbors want protection from spillover effects such as parking problems, noise, traffic, etc. Parking has been a major issue of contention in clashes between institutions and residential neighbors.
- The current way of regulating impervious surface coverage is difficult for institutions.
- There is no consensus about where institutions should grow. Some stakeholders want to see institutions limit their growth and intensive use to the interior of their properties, but other stakeholders say that is not feasible for all institutions.
- There is currently no consensus about the best mechanism to balance the needs of institutions and residents. Many stakeholders want to see a zoning category for institutions, and some

stakeholders prefer to keep the current method of regulating through Special Exemption.

Historic Preservation

- Stakeholders expressed conflicting opinions about historic preservation in the Township. Some said that historic preservation is working well, while others said that it is “broken.”

Affordable Housing

- There is a desire for LMT to include a variety of “price points” of housing, but **no consensus about specific measures to take.**
- There are currently substantial restrictions on accessory dwelling units.

Community Facilities & Infrastructure: Schools

- Schools are facing capacity limits, and many residents object to new residential development based on concerns about school capacity and tax increases.
- The School District projections for student population growth and the Comprehensive Plan projections for overall population growth are not in sync. Which numbers are more accurate or reliable?

Structure and Organization of Codes

- Current code is a result of numerous amendments over many years, so the current organization is cumbersome and confusing with numerous redundancies, making it difficult to understand and administer.
- Stakeholders expressed support for design guidelines, view shed protections, new signage standards, public realm standards, and changes to overlay districts.
- **Key topics that need attention** include institutions, commercial districts, protection of environmental features and large lot residential areas, and impervious surface and stormwater regulations.
- **Policy issues to consider** (but there is not consensus about many of these): policy measures to support historic preservation, such as TDR, expand conversion ordinance for converting non-residential historic buildings to residential; policy measures to support affordable housing, such as inclusionary zoning or fee to fund affordable housing development; improvements to shared parking provisions; compatibility of uses within zones; tree protection measures; balance of encouraging redevelopment versus grandfathering nonconformities.

Development Review Process

- The current process requires many meetings with Township staff and boards.
- The agenda for required public meetings and public hearings is often very long, requiring applicants to wait for their item sometimes many hours. This does not respect the importance of everyone's time.
- There is some desire for a more streamlined approval process, but there is no consensus about what is the right balance between by-right development, staff level approvals, and Board of Commissioner involvement in approvals.

Public Involvement for the Zoning Update Project

- There is strong support for the recommendations in the Comprehensive Plan. These recommendations guide the zoning update project.
- It is crucial to keep the Board updated and involved through the progress of the zoning update.