

Civic Engagement Committee Meeting Notes

March 7, 2019 – 7:00 p.m. - 9:00 p.m.

Board Room, Township Building

Members Present included: Maryam Phillips, Nancy Scarlato, Nina Bisbee, Terry Foley, Teri Simon, and Debra Finger. Township Staff Present included: Chris Leswing, Director, Building & Planning; Colleen Hall, Planner/GIS Technician, and Carissa Hazelton, Planner. Approximately 14 members of the public were present, including Commissioner George Manos, Commissioner Todd Sinai, Planning Commissioner Jerry Stern and Scott France.

COMMERCIAL AREA ZONING

Mr. Leswing called the meeting to order at approximately 7 PM. Mr. Leswing stated that this committee has been set up to review the Zoning Code in a workshop format. The committee reviews topics before they get to the Building & Planning Committee. The recommendations that come out of this committee are extremely helpful in this process.

Staff Presentation

Mr. Leswing provided a presentation explaining the Commercial Area Zoning Districts, which include Village Center (VC), Town Center (TC-1 and TC-2), and Special Districts (SD 3-5).

Ms. Simon asked if it made sense to zone Rock Hill Road. The corridor has been laying fallow the past 21 years with the exception of the CVS and have to ask if the passion for Rock Hill Road was misplaced. For the time being Rock Hill Road and City Avenue will not be addressed until a Master Plan is completed.

Mr. Leswing stated that Bryn Mawr had a Master Plan before it was rezoned. Ardmore was zoned after several plans were prepared. The City Avenue District took nearly five years to adopt. The draft Zoning Code puts in basic form based zoning standards for the areas that have not been a part of a planning process.

Ms. Simon stated that a lot of expensive real estate is located on Lancaster Avenue which is occupied by car dealerships who would have preferred to be located on Rock Hill Road. The Rock Hill Road zoning prohibited that. The uses need to be considered.

Mr. Leswing stated that the commercial districts had not been planned together. In the next phase we need to take on commercial master plans and the uses need to be considered together. The proposed zoning translates the properties that are currently used as commercial properties. The staff recommendation is to adopt the Zoning Code and come back with commercial area master plans.

Recommendations & Comments

Mr. Leswing asked the CEC for their feedback on the policy issues outlined in the memo. A summary of the discussion is provided below. The recommendations shown below were not voted on and were not necessarily unanimous. The recommendations shown summarize the general consensus of the CEC related to the policy discussions.

Policy Discussion: Should the TC2 District standards be modified or should the TC2 properties become VC?

- Ms. Simon stated that DPZ is not know for that type of auto-oriented coding and asked how the TC2 zoning happened. Ms. Simon stated that the TC2 district doesn't have standards that encourage improvement. This district surprised me very much. Ms. Simon asked if this TC2 development is typical of the type of development seen in Montgomery County.
- Mr. France responded that they are, but they're not necessarily the places we're most proud of. This past week developers have stated that the most profitable type of development is in a mixed-use setting.

Policy Discussion: Split zoning is being resolved along Montgomery Avenue. The Ruby's Lot is proposed to be split zoned as is the Wynnewood Shopping Center.

- Carl Watson, Shortridge, expressed concern with the Wynnewood Shopping Center split zoning.
- Mr. Stern stated that the amount of area zoned commercially may be increasing slightly if you're getting rid of commercial area split zoning. Mr. Stern asked staff to approximate how much commercial land area will be increased by virtue of removing the split zoning.
 - Mr. Leswing explained that the property is used for the commercial use even though it is not zoned for that use.
- Ms. Simon asked about the use of boundary tolerances in the new Zoning Code.
 - Mr. Leswing explained that boundary tolerances will no longer be allowed.
- Mr. Stern stated that some Zoning Codes include a provision about the required opacity of the buffer.
 - Mr. Leswing stated that there are buffer standards included in the Zoning Code. The Subdivision and Land Development Code does include a requirement that the landscaping be maintained in perpetuity.
- Barbara Sylke, Merion, asked about the buffer area behind the Wendy's on City Avenue and the lack of vegetated buffer between the residences.
 - Mr. Leswing responded that if that property were to redevelop they would be required to plant a buffer.

Policy Discussion: Adjacency/Setbacks – Staff is recommending that adjacency between commercial and LDR & MDR Districts should be established. It was not included in the initial draft Zoning Code.

- A resident asked if staff had considered adding a height adjacency.
 - Mr. Leswing responded that the maximum height of residential buildings is three stories, which is consistent with the proposed Village Center height.

Policy Discussion: Should a step back over three-stories be required? Buildings in the TC1 District may exceed three-stories in height.

- Karla Moras, Merion, stated that there are concerns with the TC1 District. The Mansions at Bala are right up against the sidewalk and it looks like a monolith. The SJU dorm on City Avenue is another example.
 - Mr. Leswing responded that requiring a step back above three stories would help to break up the building.
- Ms. Simon stated that she is in favor of requiring a step back.
- Ms. Phillips stated that TC1 appears to be just located in the heart of Ardmore. The MUST standards currently require a step back above three-stories now, so how is this different?
 - Mr. Leswing stated that the five-story height limit may be appropriate in some places. Mr. Leswing stated that he believes that the five-story buildings should be the exception and not the rule. Before we adopt this Zoning Code our staff will go out and measure the best three-story building.
- Mr. France stated that Ardmore is the first stop on the Main Line, so the buildings should be a little bigger and a little better than the other communities. There is nothing in this Code in terms of incentives. If you want to get the public spaces we need to consider how to get the public amenities.
- Ms. Simon asked how Ambler saw the revitalization and Mr. France responded that some of the revitalization was a result of the improvements to the public parking.
 - The committee discussed the issues of the availability and perceptions regarding public parking.
- Ms. Scarlato asked how much of a buffer is required along the railroad tracks.
 - Ms. Hall responded that it is 15 feet.
- Ms. Scarlato stated that Ambler is more walkable because it doesn't have a four lane Lancaster Avenue going through the commercial district. She asked if there were traffic calming measures that could take place on Lancaster Avenue.
 - Mr. Leswing responded that it underlies the need for a master plan.
 - The committee discussed issues relating to traffic along Lancaster Avenue.
- Ms. Finger asked if there is an exemplar of what we want to achieve with the new Zoning Code. She asked if there was somewhere in the US or the Northeast that could be used as an example.
 - The committee provided examples including West Chester, and Wayne.

Policy Discussion: The CEC is being asked for their input on whether provisions should be included in the Zoning Code to limit big-box development.

- Ms. Finger stated that we need to decide if we want to support small or large businesses.

- Mr. Foley stated that one thing preventing big box stores from moving into Lower Merion is the requirement that the buildings be constructed to the street. The big box companies will not move in, because they want to have the parking in the front.
- Mr. France stated that there are some anchor stores that would be desirable and suggested tying the size limits to requirements for a mixed-use building.

Policy Discussion: Staff recommends the Zoning Code be amended to limit the installation of additional drive through facilities.

- The committee agreed.

Additional Discussion

Ms. Phillips stated that we need to look at how much residential growth should be allowed in the commercial areas.

Ms. Simon concurred and stated that a lot of development has already been focused in certain areas, such as Ardmore and City Avenue.

Closing Remarks

Mr. Leswing drew the meeting to a close at approximately 9 PM.

Meeting notes recorded by Carissa Hazelton