

**Reading LRA
Public Meeting Report
St Constantine & Helen Greek Orthodox Church
Thursday, March 14, 2012**

LRA Attending: J. Knockstead, R. Corcoran, F. Acosta, S. Marmarou, E. Raffaelli, M. Ballas

Others attending: L. Kelleher, C. Folk from Mary's Shelter

Mr. Corcoran called the meeting to order at approximately 7:10 pm. He stated that this meeting was scheduled to bring the community up to date on the reuse of the Navy Marine Center site.

Ms. Kelleher provided background beginning with the County Commissioner's undertaking the LRA process when they wanted to place a communications center and a City police academy on the site. When they had a change in plans in early 2008, the City decided to continue with the LRA process. She explained that when a military site is decommissioned the Base Realignment and Closure (BRAC) process is required. Under BRAC, the LRA is required to advertise for homeless organization use of the site. Mary's Shelter and Berks Women in Crisis (BWIC) submitted an application to use the main facility. The Reading Hospital and Medical Center and Reading School District also applied for the site. She then explained the categories of no cost transfer under BRAC and how the LRA used a consulting group to study the site, the area, etc. and make recommendations for the reuse.

Ms. Kelleher reminded the group that the LRA held four (4) public meetings to get the community's input on their preferences for the reuse of the sight. She stated that each meeting was well advertised and flyers were mailed to each property in the 18-1 and 18-2 precincts, which brought between 30 and 50 residents to each meeting. She stated that at the third meeting the residents actually took a vote on all four (4) applications. She stated that BWIC and the Reading School District received no support and Reading Hospital and Mary's Shelter received overwhelming support.

After BWIC withdrew, the Reuse Plan was drafted defining a reuse by Reading Hospital for 6.06 acres and Mary's Shelter for 1 acre. She referred to the site plan prepared by the Reading Hospital showing its three facilities and Mary's Shelter's facility on the one acre parcel at the back of the lot. The LRA held a public hearing at St Elizabeth's Villa and residents supported the plan. However, Reading Hospital withdrew around October 2010 for various reasons. After that Alvernia and Berks Catholic expressed interest but neither applied.

Around the beginning of the 2011 the LRA asked Ms. Kelleher to once again explore potential taxable uses for the remaining 6.06 acres. Mary's Shelter reevaluated their needs and

requested that the LRA consider amending the plan to allow them to relocate into the main facility instead of building a new facility on a one acre lot at the rear of the property. She explained that the LRA held approximately three (3) meetings to discuss the amended reuse plan and discussed the use of the remaining acreage. As many in the community expressed a preference for a taxable use at the site, the LRA turned to the Reading Redevelopment Authority (RRA) for assistance. Under BRAC regulations, the RRA is permitted to make a private sale bid after the Navy sets the fair market value of the land.

Ms. Kelleher explained that if a reuse is not identified by the LRA, the Navy will have the property appraised to determine the fair market value of the property and then the property will be put out for public bid. She explained that the LRA believed that the best overall option for the site would be for the RRA to purchase the site as their reuse plan will be held at a public meeting and again the neighborhood would have a chance to provide input.

A resident expressed the belief that area property values would fall if Mary's Shelter operates on the site. Ms. Kelleher expressed the belief that that is unlikely as the property values around the Upland Avenue area where Mary's Shelter's other facility is located have not fallen.

A resident inquired if the site would be used for low income housing or subsidized housing. Ms. Kelleher stated that the City would probably not support that type of housing model.

A resident inquired about the hearing held last Tuesday in Council Chambers. Ms. Kelleher explained that the site is in an R2 zoning district and as required by the Zoning Ordinance, Mary's Shelter needed to apply for a Conditional Use permit for a group home. At last week's hearing City Council heard testimony on Mary's Shelter's application. She stated that as stated by the Zoning Administrator, the application for a group home meets the criteria required for a group home. Council will make a decision at their March 26th meeting.

A resident asked if the zoning of the area will change due to the approval of the group home application. Ms. Kelleher explained that the City is broken up into zoning districts; each zoning district has permitted uses along with Conditional Use and Special Exception uses. In R2 zoning districts group homes are permitted if a Conditional Use permit is approved by Council. If the permit is approved the zoning use of the building alone will change.

A resident inquired if the City will be changing the zoning for the site to a high density area. Ms. Kelleher explained that this R2 site adjoins with the neighboring R1 area. She stated that changing the zoning for this site to R3 or something other would constitute spot zoning, which is illegal.

A resident inquired about the LRA members. Ms. Kelleher stated that the members are

Council President Francis Acosta, Councilors Corcoran and Marmarou, Redevelopment Authority member Phil Coles, Planning Commission member Ermete Raffaelli, and at large members Jack Knockstead and Maria Ballas.

A resident inquired about environmental contamination at the site such as asbestos, lead, motor oil, etc. Ms. Kelleher stated that the Navy disclosed an environmental report on the site, which is on the City's LRA website. The federal CERCLA (Comprehensive Environmental Response Compensation and Liability Act, under the EPA) regulations do not allow the former property owner to walk away leaving a new owner with environmental contamination. If contamination is identified CERCLA holds the former owner responsible for the environmental contamination.

A resident questioned the number of homes to be built on the residual acreage. Ms. Kelleher stated that that is unknown at this point in time as that decision will be made when the RRA identifies a developer for the site.

A resident expressed the belief that the site should be used for commercial purposes. Ms. Kelleher explained that commercial uses are not permitted in R2 zoning districts. She stated that if the RRA decides to take that route, the developer will need to obtain a zoning variance.

Mr. Raffaelli, LRA member, stated that the LRA decided to use the RRA approach as it gives the City and the surrounding community control over the final disposition of the site.

Ms. Kelleher stated that almost any new use at the residual area will require an application to the Zoning Hearing Board and the community will again have the opportunity to provide input. She noted that the Zoning Hearing Board is receptive to community input and she explained the success the College Heights Community Council has with opposing or supporting applications coming before the Zoning Hearing Board.

A resident expressed the belief that the best use for the site is a police academy or police substation. Ms. Kelleher explained that when the County was the LRA Chief Heim made application to share the site for an academy. However, after the County withdrew from the LRA process, Chief Heim established a strong academy in coordination with Alvernia University, which is in close proximity to the firing range. She also noted that the City does not have the financial resources to undertake a project of that scope at this time.

A resident again expressed the belief that the site should be used for commercial purposes. Ms. Kelleher explained that the consultants and the LRA itself considered commercial reuse; however, the location of the site and the zoning designation of the site along with the down economy made commercial reuse seem impractical. However, commercial reuse could certainly be explored by the RRA.

Several residents expressed the belief that the reuse plan should be rejected and redone. Ms. Kelleher explained that the BRAC process allows the LRA with two (2) years to complete a reuse plan. She stated that this site was decommissioned around 2005 and the County began the LRA process. The County withdrew from the LRA process in early 2008. The City decided to take over as the LRA. She noted that the County's time period expired in 2008 and the City's time period expired in 2010. She stated that the Navy has been generous by working to provide the LRA with additional time to handle the unexpected twists that have occurred. She again referred to the Reading Hospital's site plan noting the community's support of the plan in 2010. She stated that at this point in time the plan cannot be redone.

Mr. Corcoran made some closing remarks and thanked residents for attending and discussing this issue.

The meeting adjourned at approximately 8:15 pm.

Respectfully submitted by Linda A. Kelleher CMC, City Clerk