

**Regular meeting of the City of Reading Planning Commission  
April 12, 2005 at 7:30 pm**

**Members present:**

Fritz Rothermel, Chairman  
Wayne Jonas Bealer  
Edmund Palka  
Ermete Raffaelli  
Irvin Cohen  
David Reppert

**Staff present:**

Andrew Miller, Senior Planner

**Others present:**

Karl Graybill, Executive Director, Downtown Improvement District  
Larry Lee, Executive Director, Reading Parking Authority  
Stephen Bensinger, Principal, Stackhouse Bensinger Inc.  
Doug Kramer, Synergetics Architects  
Bill Rider, Walker Consultants  
Ken Pick, Director, Berks County Community Development Office

**Minutes:**

Chairman Rothermel called the March meeting to order, reviewed the agenda and asked for motions for its acceptance. On the motion of Mr. Cohen and the second of Mr. Palka, the Planning Commission approved the agenda, unanimously.

**Presentation of the Downtown Improvement District (DID),**

Mr. Rothermel introduced Karl Graybill. Mr. Graybill gave a brief background of the District, outlining the mission of the District, the area it serves and the services provided. He explained the changes being proposed to the service area, the management association, and the term of renewal. Whereas, the District had previously been chartered, and subsequently renewed for 5-year intervals, Mr. Graybill is asking the Council for a ten and a half year extension. The ten years would allow the District more time to operate and budget, before needing renewal. The half year would align the expiration of terms to that of the fiscal year.

Mr. Graybill mentioned the public hearing on the preliminary plan (before the Council) scheduled for Thursday, April 14 at 7:00p. All are invited to attend. Following said hearing and input, revisions will be made. A final plan will be presented to Council at another public hearing scheduled for Thursday, April 28. Property owners within the District, and with objections, may make a formal written vote to the City Clerk against the plan. At least 40% of those owners must make such a vote to nullify the plan.

Mr. Graybill explained the method of assessment. All commercial, industrial and rented residential properties are assessed the 4.754 millage. This rate is not proposed to change. Tax-exempt properties are "aggressively" encouraged to make voluntary contributions.

Mr. Palka complemented the District on the improved cleanliness of the downtown and asked about the ambassadors' schedules.

Mr. Reppert asked about the number of employees.

Mr. Graybill said there are four or five ambassadors on each shift (less on Saturdays), providing cleaning and maintenance services, escorts and business checks. He hopes for an eventual increase in hours of operation, possibly including Sundays. Currently, the budgeted overtime has been spent, due in part to the events of the Berks Jazz Fest. Mr. Graybill went on to mention other maintenance and service efforts and marketing initiatives.

Mr. Rothermel noted that the proposed boundary of the District covers the major arteries of the City, with the exception of North Eighth Street, between Walnut and Washington Streets. He asked Mr. Graybill to consider moving that boundary one block eastward and possibly include City Hall, as well. He noted the boundary runs along the centerlines of streets. Since trash blows across the street, the District might consider covering both sides.

Mr. Graybill said the new legislation from the State allows easier amendments to the plan and plan area.

**Review of Preliminary Land Development Plan, “Second and Washington Streets Parking Structure”,**  
proposed for the southeast corner of Second and Washington Streets.

Larry Lee introduced himself and the representatives from Stackhouse Bensinger Inc. and Synergetics Architects.

Mr. Lee said his Board perceives the need for more parking in that area to address:

- safety concerns - employees in the Gateway Building have to cross Second Street to access the garage on Front Street.
- the needs of Reading Area Community College – they have committed to taking over the full capacity of the Front and Washington Streets garage.
- the Gateway Building – to help retain tenant businesses and attract new ones to fill vacancies.
- the Goggleworks parking needs – basic parking is provided on-site, but additional parking will be needed during events.
- a complement to the RACC theater and technology center projects – additional parking may be required when those projects are completed.
- a complement to the riverfront redevelopment efforts - additional parking may be required when those projects are completed.

Mr. Lee assured the Commission that the project is being coordinated with the Community Development Office, Our City Reading, Inc., Public Works, Greater Berks Development Fund, RACC and Wachovia Bank.

Mr. Bensinger presented a series of conceptual plans. He proposed widening Thorn Street from 16 feet to 22 feet and possibly making it two-way, contingent on PennDOT approval.

Mr. Cohen asked if a traffic light is planned at Thorn and Washington Streets.

Mr. Bensinger answered “no”.

Mr. Bealer suggested additional pedestrian crosswalk markings.

Mr. Palka asked what area is proposed for the retail space.

Mr. Bensinger answered, between 2200 and 2600 square feet on the first floor.

Mr. Miller asked for clarification/confirmation on the proposed height of the garage.

Mr. Kramer answered about 500 spaces on four decks above grade.

Mr. Raffaelli asked about the possibility of expanding, or adding commercial spaces, if demand dictates.

Mr. Lee said that it is cost prohibitive to give up first floor spaces and add another deck.

Mr. Rider explained that architectural constraints would prevent adding retail space after the garage is built. He added that they expect  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the patrons to exit the garage via the southeast stair/elevator tower. He pointed out the three-lane entrance/exit designed to minimize queuing, adding that the center lane can reverse direction to match the time-of-day traffic conditions.

Mr. Kramer wants the structure to fit the neighborhood and the other buildings, existing and planned. He gave explanation of building style, materials, colors and façade details. The spandrels and sheer walls are being designed to conceal the sloping ramps of the garage and mimic the office/industrial buildings in the area. Inset panels are proposed in the sheer walls that may include brick relief artworks, likened to the Colonial Trust (American Bank) building on North Fifth Street. There will be four decks, above grade, 10’6” floor to floor, for a total height of approximately 44 feet to the top of the spandrel. The stair/elevator towers are approximately 55 feet, exceeding the 50-foot zoning limit and requiring variance from the Zoning Hearing Board. The heights of the Gateway Building (about 55’) and the Goggleworks building (60-64’) are cited as further evidence that the garage will ‘fit in’.

Mr. Rothermel asked if the sloping drives of the garage wouldn’t be visible at night, when lit from within.

Mr. Kramer agreed that they would be.

Mr. Raffaelli suggested a brick scheme on the stair tower to mimic the Goggleworks building. He asked the project managers to consider a stipulation barring construction vehicles from using Museum Road over Wyomissing Creek, citing its deteriorating condition.

Mr. Bealer suggested using Route 222/422 West Shore by-pass, reminding of a Shillington Borough ordinance barring larger (over 48’) vehicles.

Mr. Rothermel complimented the architects on the choice of style and colors, adding that the quality has been typical of Synergetics’ projects. He appreciates the setbacks provided, for the traffic safety and the views they will afford of the RACC theater. He reminded that the Commission would have the opportunity for additional input if Thorn Street were proposed to be widened.

Mr. Bensinger asked for approval of the Preliminary Plan.

Mr. Rothermel invited a motion.

Mr. Bealer made a motion to approve the plan with the provisions that the Parking Authority comes back with a realignment plan for Thorn Street, pedestrian crosswalk lines be added at Washington and Thorn Streets, necessary variances be obtained by the Zoning Hearing Board, and all comments from the County Planning Commission and City Public Works be addressed. Mr. Reppert seconded the motion and the Planning Commission approved the Preliminary Plan, unanimously. **Resolution #15-2005**

### **Presentation of the proposed Goggleworks Redevelopment Area,**

Mr. Pick and Mr. Miller gave a PowerPoint presentation suggesting a Redevelopment Area be designated for several blocks between Penn and Walnut, Front and Third Streets. A map, numerous pictures, and a simplified outline of the process were shown.

Mr. Pick reminded the Commission that the plan for a Redevelopment Area is entirely in their hands. Mr. Rothermel cautioned that the Area doesn't have to be big to be expensive, especially when property acquisition is considered.

Mr. Bealer wondered why we'd consider disturbing/removing established businesses who are already contributing to the area. Mr. Rothermel reminded that the outline of the Area need not mandate redevelopment designs on every parcel within.

Mr. Raffaelli asked about the advantages/disadvantages to staging redevelopment activities as RACC's and Goggleworks' projects dictate. He sees a potential disadvantage in allowing real estate speculators extra time to buy up properties. Mr. Rothermel reminded that appraisals would be required to determine fair market values.

Mr. Bealer asked if the circulation of bus traffic, as it relates to Inner-City Bus Terminal, is under the purview of the Redevelopment Authority.

Mr. Pick said the City already has the power to take private property for public uses. The Redevelopment Authority, as part of the Redevelopment Area process has the added ability to take private property for other, more beneficial, private uses. He cited West Reading's recent experience as an example.

Mr. Rothermel suggested the Commission take a walking tour of the area and discussed possible times. The members agreed on Thursday, April 21, at 2:00p. Mr. Miller will notify Michael Lauter of this tour, look into parking arrangements and call everyone Wednesday, April 20, to confirm attendance. Mr. Miller will check with the Solicitor regarding the legal concern of having a quorum present.

### **Other business**

Mr. Rothermel reminded the Commission that their by-laws require the election of its officer at the May meeting. He recalled that Michael Lauter had chaired the nominating committee, last year. He suggested that Mr. Lauter do it again, adding that he had already spoken to him about it. The Commission agreed. Mr. Palka offered to assist.

Mr. Rothermel raised the issue of the unsatisfactory condition of the minutes from the February and March meetings. He feels that some of the details are "superfluous" and should be edited down. He recognized the difficulty of the transition for planning staff and offered to assist staff in revising the minutes, with the consent of the Commission. The Commission agreed. Mr. Miller asked that a sign-in sheet be used in the future. Mr. Rothermel thinks it a good idea. Mr. Bealer offered his assistance, as well, remarking that some of the January minutes were copied verbatim into the body of the February minutes, namely the records of the Hoodak Stadium and Olive Street vacation reviews.

Mr. Rothermel reminded that nothing has been received from the November meeting. He then asked each member to go over the February minutes and recall how they voted on each plan. Mr. Bealer said he will send to the Planning Office, his suggested revisions to the February minutes, much as he did for the March minutes.

Mr. Raffaelli wondered why, two years ago, a sewer line ("the Wyomissing Express") was extended through the City and across the 18<sup>th</sup> Ward..... past the Wyomissing Authority!..... and on to Fritz Island.....what portion Wyomissing paid..... what arrangement..... why, less than eight months later, it was relocated with the Mohnton Express line to the KVP site. Mr. Miller will look into the matter.

Mr. Miller extended to the Commission the offer from RiverPlace for a special presentation of their draft Master Plan. The members felt that the scheduled public meeting will be opportunity enough.

Mr. Rothermel wondered why the Commission never saw land development plans for the sports bar (Kurtz

House) on the south side of Penn Street, in the 200 block. He wondered how the site was classified following a fire and what percentage was actually destroyed. He advised seeking an answer from Jon Krueger, County Subdivision Planner. Mr. Bealer wondered if they needed a zoning use permit, at least, since it appears from the construction that the residential element of the former building is being left out of the reconstruction.

Mr. Bealer commented on the progress being made at the Riverfront Commerce Center (formerly the Dana Store yards), but wondered what they plan to do about sidewalks, if anything. Mr. Miller will look into the matter. Mr. Bealer will research it further and take pictures.

### **Adjournment**

Mr. Rothermel asked for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Mr. Cohen made the motion, Mr. Palka seconded, and the Commission voted to adjourn, unanimously. - 9:35 pm.

AWM / awm

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