

Minutes
Regular meeting of the City of Reading Planning Commission
August 8, 2006 at 7:00 pm

Members present:

Ermete Raffaelli, Chairman
David Reppert, Vice Chairman
Michael Lauter, Secretary
Wayne Jonas Bealer, Assistant Secretary

Staff present:

Andrew W. Miller, City Planner
Michelle R. Mayfield, Legal Specialist
Adam Mukerji, Redevelopment Authority Director
Charles M. Jones, Public Works Director

Others present:

Lee C. Olsen, Olsen deTurck Architects
Scott T. Miller, Stackhouse Bensing Inc.
Albert R. Boscov, Our City Reading, Inc.
John T. O'Neill, Landmark Surveying
Gene M. Jamison, TKG Construction Company
James A. Pilkerton, J. A. Pilkerton Consulting Services
Amy Anuszewski, Reading Eagle Company

Chairman Raffaelli called the August meeting to order, and expressed the grievance over the death of Officer Scott A. Wertz, a nine-year veteran of the Reading Police Department who was killed in the line of duty, two days earlier.

Mr. Raffaelli asked for acceptance of the evening's agenda. Mr. Lauter moved to approve the agenda. Mr. Reppert seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to approve the August agenda.

Subdivision and Land Development:

Review the **preliminary** land development plan for the **Goggleworks Apartments**, fifty-nine (59) or sixty (60) high-rise apartments proposed for those parcels known as 100 and 110 North Second Street and 101 Pear Street. [0:03]

Mr. Olsen described the timeline planned for solving the zoning issues, anticipating a City Council vote on the zoning classification at their next regular meeting.

Scott Miller described the project location, the parking level configuration proposed, and the circulation within. He noted the Planning Office and Department of Public Works concerns, per their written reviews, and recognized the need for Zoning Ordinance relief.

Mr. Bealer recalled Mr. Boscov's previous statement (at the July meeting) that ninety (90) off-street parking spaces would be provided. Scott Miller said the current design counts about 83-84 spaces.

Mr. Bealer noted the County Planning recommendation to provide an additional exit to North Second Street. Scott Miller said the fourteen feet of elevation differential between the front and rear of the parcel make such a design difficult. He said they will be applying for a Department of Transportation (PennDOT) highway occupancy permit. He hoped the proposed stacking distance for entering cars would help make their case. Mr. Boscov mentioned the probability of restricting left turns, to and from the Washington Street driveway. He said one point of entry would contribute to the air of security deemed necessary for the project's success.

Mr. Olsen described the exterior, with faceted windows, floor-to-ceiling in the living rooms and in the master bedrooms of the two bedroom units, laid-in-place textured concrete masonry units, and elevator and stair towers at each end. He said a fitness center may be placed on first floor, potentially eliminating one unit. He said a decision on allowing access to the garden level from the first floor units had not yet been made. Light poles, fencing and planters would enhance the outdoor spaces. The interiors would feature wood floors, marble surfacing in the bathrooms, granite in the kitchens, and stainless steel-faced appliances.

Mr. Lauter asked about the operability of the windows. Mr. Olsen intended operable sashes, but with a limited range (about six inches) for safety. The windows would be coated double-paned glass (low-emissivity thermopane), with vertical blinds for a uniform look from the exterior.

Mr. Lauter questioned the security measures proposed for the lobby area. Mr. Olsen mentioned provisions for a security booth. Mr. Boscov said the lobby's telephone system would photograph guests for instant identification by residents.

Mr. Bealer asked if the units were to be rented as apartments or owned as condominiums. Mr. Boscov said they had looked into a condominium arrangement, but their marketing study recommended against it. He hoped condominiums might prove viable, noting the community advantages of the more permanent residence. He said the units will be without compare, considering the competing apartment offerings in the greater Reading area. He said tenants will have control over the utilities in each unit and pay those costs as separate from the rent. He said the apartments will have professional management, those costs being built into the project's budget.

Andrew Miller asked if eastbound traffic on Washington Street would also be prohibited from making left turns into the site. Mr. Boscov said that could be arranged.

Andrew Miller asked if delivery vehicles would enter the parking structure. Mr. Boscov said they may design a drop-off, on North Second or Washington Street. Scott Miller said it was another issue to discuss with PennDOT. Mr. Boscov said a lot of the designed features are security-driven, calling it a reality of the time in Reading, and hoping it wouldn't be needed in future.

Mr. Raffaelli suggested a condominium option, by floor. Mr. Boscov liked the suggestion, but referred back to the findings of the marketing study they commissioned. He said they would like to explore it, hoping to complete a model unit about two months prior to project completion.

Andrew Miller asked if the proposed fitness center would mean losing an apartment unit. Mr. Boscov said it would, espousing it as a selling point. He said if it were not built, the space would make a sixtieth apartment.

Scott Miller suggested a possible conditional approval for the plan presented, subject to resolution of the zoning issues. Andrew Miller said he wouldn't recommend an approval, especially since the area has yet to be appropriately zoned. He recognized the efforts at continuing the dialogue and presentation, and the continued attention to resolving the ordinance-related issues, suggesting the Commission might consider an approval as final if the zoning is resolved. He reviewed the key dates of the City Council and Zoning Hearing Board roles. Mr. Bealer suggested an extra meeting in September, to save the project a couple of weeks. Mr. Boscov appreciated the consideration, hoping to get started before the cold weather hampered construction activity. Mr. Olsen intended to time the bidding process in anticipation of the City approvals. Mr. Jones stressed the immediate need to clear the street design and traffic issues with PennDOT. Mr. Boscov said they would be meeting with the Department, no later than the next week. Mr. Mukerji noted the requirement for sewer planning modules. Scott Miller said they would be filed later in the week.

Mr. Lauter motioned to table the preliminary plan. Mr. Bealer seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to table the preliminary plan.

Review the **preliminary** land development plan for **R/C Theatres**, an eleven (11) or twelve (12) screen cinema proposed for that parcel at the southwest corner of North Second and Washington Streets. [58:19]

Mr. Olsen presented on behalf of R/C Theatres Management Corp. and TK Architects Inc., the owners and lead architects respectively.

Scott Miller reviewed the general site plan, showing the theater covering the entire parcel. He said the adjacent pedestrian walkways, formerly reserved as extensions of Court and Pear Streets, have been abandoned as streets, though utility easements remain. Mr. Bealer asked Mr. Jones about the feasibility of relocating the utilities. Mr. Jones predicted an extensive effort, almost all the major utilities having a presence in those walkways. He said they must study the capacity and the feasibility of alternate routes. He discouraged building atop such reservations, because of the difficulty in servicing and repairing damaged lines. Scott Miller suggested there may already be some redundancy in the lines around the block, and limited lateral hookups, thereby making the process simpler.

Mr. Raffaelli asked about the building's footers projecting into the walkway. Mr. Olsen described an "eccentric footing" to stay within the property, while satisfying the load distribution needs. Andrew Miller said additional information on foundation design was expected when a subsurface investigation was complete.

Mr. Bealer wondered about the intended timetable, as compared to the apartment project. Mr. Olsen said the same calendar suggested for that project would work for the theater, if the utility issues can be resolved. Mr. Boscov said the owner's goal was an opening by Memorial Day of 2007. He set a more realistic date of July 4th of 2007, which would still save much of the summer movie season.

Mr. Raffaelli asked if, as the Redevelopment Authority's land, the project would invoke the 1% 'fine arts' contribution. Mr. Mukerji indicated that the policy was still in effect.

Mr. Lauter raised the 'patron drop-off' issue, wondering if PennDOT would allow the necessary modifications. Scott Miller said they will discuss the issue with PennDOT, and in the context of the overall plans for the intersection. Mr. Boscov felt there were several possibilities for the placement of a 'pull-off zone'. Mr. Lauter felt that, whether one were designed or not, it would be so used. Mr. Boscov said that most show times would be at times other than peak traffic hours. Mr. Lauter cited the evening events at the Sovereign Center and the Performing Arts Center as contributing factors to the traffic load on that route.

Mr. Olsen described the floor plan; the theaters, box office, concessions, restrooms, and a retail space, expected to be deleted for a trash storage area at the southeast corner. He said a mezzanine level would provide for projection equipment and catwalk access. He described the four side elevations, in pre-cast masonry panels and Dryvit®, averaging 38 feet in height, with another 12 feet for the IMAX® theater portion. Mr. Boscov said the IMAX® will cost about \$2.5 million. He said what was previously reserved for museums, is gaining commercial feasibility as Warner Bros. Entertainment and Sony Pictures Digital Inc. seek to format all their new features for the giant screen. He said the conversion time has been reduced to two weeks. He said his conversations with R/C Theatres indicated expected ticket prices at \$8 in the regular theaters and \$10 in the IMAX®.

Andrew Miller asked if a height variance was still necessary for a 60-foot structure, given the numbers mentioned. He asked about the dimensions of the screen itself. Mr. Boscov said they'd have to confirm the exact dimensions with the owner.

Andrew Miller wondered if, with the Community College's Miller Center backing up to the proposed R/C Theatre, the two might be able to share services, especially trash storage and collection. He felt it would be unfortunate to lose the additional retail space to shelter a dumpster.

Ms. Mayfield asked if patrons can exit directly to the walkway via the side doors. Mr. Olsen believed those doors to be solely emergency exits, the intended egress to be back through the main entrance. Mr. Boscov said they'd confirm with R/C Theatres. Andrew Miller felt those exits would make it more feasible to plan drop-offs and pick-ups on North Front Street, since a well-lit pedestrian amenity is part of the Community College's project.

Mr. Jones asked about the status of sewer planning documentation. Scott Miller said it would be submitted later in the week when the calculations were complete.

Mr. Lauter stated his support for the project, but felt the arrangements for traffic circulation and drop-offs to be the biggest challenge. He recalled the Glenside Elementary School predicament, where parents dropping-off their children for school have aggravated the residents of the area. Mr. Boscov said they will review it, noting that movie showings are at least staggered. Mr. Raffaelli extended the concern to the Miller Center as well, since elderly patrons visiting that venue would likely require accommodation. Mr. Boscov asked what provisions were made for the Miller Center to address drop-off and handicapped parking. Andrew Miller said he would check the record.

Mr. Bealer moved to table the plan, pending the review and action of the Zoning Hearing Board. Mr. Lauter seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to table the preliminary plan.

Review the (revised) **final** subdivision plan for **Downing II – Minor Subdivision**, two residential lots proposed from that parcel known as 2369 Downing Street. [1:42]

Mr. Raffaelli asked if the required sewage disposal documentation had been received. Mr. Miller answered yes. Mr. O'Neill stated that the plans had been revised to comply with the Planning Office review letter.

Mr. Bealer asked about the requested waivers; from the Ordinance-required sidewalks, street lights, and capped sewer laterals. Mr. Jamison said no one had been able to designate where the future sewer lines would be laid.

Mr. Miller suggested that any approval include a directive to consult the Plumbing Inspector regarding the installation of roof leaders to collect rainwater. Mr. O'Neill later read the plan note that describes the construction of rainwater conductors between the roofs and curb.

Mr. Bealer asked about building elevations. Mr. Jamison showed them, and indicated his intent to include windows on the sides.

Ms. Mayfield asked if an improvements agreement was necessary. Mr. Jones, noting that curbing already exists, and that utility connections are covered by occupancy permits, felt the only applicable improvement would be sidewalk installation, if required. Mr. Miller referred to a note on the plan offering sidewalks, if required at a later date. He noted that other City departments have required sidewalks at construction, even where the Planning Commission had granted a waiver. Mr. Jamison had no problem with the policy, if enforced, but hoped that the rest of the neighborhood would also be made to comply.

Mr. Raffaelli asked about the septic system designs. Mr. Miller referred to a letter from Ludgate

Engineering Corporation approving the designs.

Mr. Lauter moved to approve the final plan, waiving the required sidewalks, street lights, capped sewer laterals, and subdivision improvements agreement. Mr. Reppert seconded the motion. And the Commission voted unanimously to approve the final plan.

Resolution #32-2006

Review the **final** subdivision plan for **Kim A. Snyder – Lot Line Revision**, a subdivision proposed for that parcel known as 1700 Hampden Boulevard. [1:57]

Mr. Pilkerton described the proposal as “simple as subdivisions get”. He described the location and the improvements that encroached on the current property line, making the subdivision necessary. He said the result will be an existing house and a vacant lot for sale.

Mr. Raffaelli, referring to the staff comments, recognized the need for the County Planning comments before taking action. Mr. Miller agreed, and noted that Ordinance-related revisions were also necessary. Mr. Pilkerton said that he had some questions about those revisions and would call the Planning Office.

Ms. Mayfield asked if the plan was in accord with the deeds previously recorded. Mr. Pilkerton said it is.

Mr. Miller asked how the subdivision was recorded without the plat. Mr. Pilkerton stated that anyone can record deeds.

Mr. Jones suggested a note clearly stating that the plan proposes a subdivision only, and that future owners have the responsibility for permitting for any new construction.

Mr. Miller asked if any title companies called attention to the discrepancy. Mr. Pilkerton said “they don’t insure much”.

Mr. Bealer moved to table the Snyder plan, pending receipt of the County Planning review. Mr. Lauter seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to table the subdivision plan.

Review the **preliminary** land development plan for the **Fox Tail Subdivision**, (known previously as the “Myrtle A. Valeriano Subdivision”) a subdivision and two single-family detached units proposed at the southwest corner of the intersection of High and Lowrie Streets. [2:05]

Mr. Miller reported that the developer was still awaiting approval for their sewage disposal designs, and that other Ordinance-related revisions were still needed. He referred to the applicant’s request for a sixty-day extension.

Mr. Bealer said he looks favorably on the request for the extension.

Mr. Lauter moved to table the Fox Tail Subdivision plan, granting the requested sixty-day extension. Mr. Reppert seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to table the plan.

Minutes: [2:07]

Mr. Raffaelli asked if there were any comments on the July 11th minutes. He asked about the review of the Pike Café Inc. – Parking Lot Expansion, and the improvements that appeared to have been constructed before the Planning Commission review. Mr. Miller agreed that some were, and that others have existed since the demolition of the previously building, lost to a fire, and the lot’s subsequent use as a parking lot.

Mr. Bealer moved to accept the July minutes, as presented. Mr. Lauter seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to approve the July minutes.

Resolution #33-2006

Other business: [2:11]

Mr. Bealer asked about the unauthorized paving at North Third and Washington Streets next to the Zion Baptist Church. Mr. Miller said the applicable trades and codes departments were told to withhold enforcement action. Mr. Bealer had concerns about stormwater effects over the larger impervious area. Ms. Mayfield confirmed that the enforcing departments have been held back. Mr. Raffaelli asked if permits were pulled for the paving. Mr. Miller said no.

Mr. Bealer asked if any contact had been made from the Norfolk Southern Corporation, in response to the enforcement notice over the unauthorized subdivision. Ms. Mayfield answered no.

Mr. Bealer asked about the Gordon Hoodak Stadium plans for Lauer's Park Elementary School. He couldn't recall any final plan submission, and wondered about the retaining walls, landscaping and sidewalk to be financed through the "Safe Routes to School" cost reimbursement program. He said the Reading School District received the funding, but has yet to produce the plans. Mr. Jones confirmed that the School District received the money through the Reading Area Transportation Study. Mr. Miller recalled the contracted engineering firm's legal troubles that have made tracking the plans difficult. He said the firm has since transformed itself, and recently approached the Planning Office regarding a new parking lot at the Elementary School. He said the Planning Office will demand full plans prior to any permits, including boundary information and as-built plans for the Stadium. He remembered a request from the School's principal, earlier in the year, for information on the parcels boundaries. He said the Planning Office wasn't able to help without those required plans. Mr. Jones stated that PennDOT was in-charge of the cost reimbursement, and a request for bids was advertised. Mr. Miller asked if "Safe Routes to School" monies can be awarded to school districts. Mr. Jones said any public entity can apply for the funds.

Mr. Bealer raised the issue of the property maintenance at the Riverfront Commerce Center, specifically the height of the grass along the sidewalks. He said he'd take-up the issue with the Codes Office.

Mr. Raffaelli asked about the Glenside Elementary School's responsibility for the erosion of the slopes along the Warren Street By-pass, a result of the earth disturbance at the magnet school construction. Mr. Miller said he would look at the erosion and sedimentation control plan and discuss the matter with the County Conservation District.

Mr. Raffaelli asked for an update on the screening issues at 200 Penn Street. Mr. Miller said that no further action had been taken. Mr. Raffaelli asked if there were any intention to do so, and asked Ms. Mayfield to research the matter.

Ms. Mayfield reminded the Commission of its offer of a special meeting on the fourth Tuesday of September. Mr. Raffaelli asked Mr. Miller to notify the members closer to the date. Mr. Lauter stated his need for an earlier-scheduled time.

Mr. Reppert moved to adjourn the August meeting. Mr. Lauter seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to adjourn the August meeting, 4 to 0. – 9:32 pm.