

**Regular meeting of the City of Reading Planning Commission
December 13, 2005 at 7:30 pm**

Members present:

Ermete Raffaelli, Chairman
David Reppert, Vice Chairman
Wayne Jonas Bealer, Assistant Secretary
Frederic dep Rothermel

Staff present:

Andrew Miller, City Planner
Michelle Mayfield, Legal Specialist

Others present:

Richard Guida, Golden, Masano, Bradley
Thomas Chapman Jr., Reading School District
Barry J. Suski, Reading School District
James C. McCarthy, McCarthy Engineering Associates PC
Beth M. Auman, McCarthy Engineering Associates PC
Sylvia B. Deye, Dimensional Architecture
John W. Roland, Roland & Schlegel PC
Richard J. Mable, Reading Hospital and Medical Center
James J. Brady Jr., Spotts Stevens & McCoy
M. Brad King, Trammell Crow Company
Matthew Bressler, Traffic Planning and Design, Inc.
Roger Lehmann, All County & Associates, Inc.
Don Naughton
Larry Lloyd, Berks County Conservancy
Amy Anuszewski, Reading Eagle

Minutes:

Chairman Raffaelli called the December meeting to order, and referred to the agenda. Mr. Miller stated that the sixth item, the subdivision plan for Third and Buttonwood Streets, had been voluntarily withdrawn. Mr. Rothermel motioned to approve the agenda, with the change. Mr. Bealer seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to approve the agenda.

Review the preliminary land development plan for the Glenside Elementary - School of Performing Arts, a magnet school proposed for the Reading School District property known as 1301 Schuylkill Avenue.

Mr. Guida, attorney for the School District, reminded the Commission of the presentation at their previous meeting. He said the preliminary plan was tabled pending receipt of the County Planning review, a “pro forma matter” in his words. He emphasized the School District’s need for final approval, relating it to Pennsylvania’s Department of Education PlanCon (Planning and Construction Workbook) commitments and construction bidding. He said the school must open for the 2006-2007 school year, to relieve the overcrowded conditions. He asked for conditional final approval, assuring that the requested traffic study and improvements agreement would follow, the amount of the latter to be negotiated with the City Engineer. He called it a “drop-dead date”, stating that any further delay would result in another school year lapsing. He deferred to the project engineers for further explanations.

Mr. McCarthy introduced himself and referred to the plat. He pointed out the proposed driveway and its staging area for the busses to address the traffic congestion issue in the neighborhood. He stated that the revised plans comply with the Planning staff and Public Works’ reviews. He recalled a conversation with Public Works officials that determined the placement of monumentation to be unnecessary. A written request for waiver was submitted. He said his firm has done a lot of work in the City, and monumentation had never previously been requested. He said the traffic study has been submitted to Public Works and the drainage concerns have been resolved. Mr. Guida added that the improvements agreement would be prepared, noting that he had discussed the issue with Ms. Mayfield and determined a conditional approval to be appropriate. He said virtually every other municipality works similarly. Ms. Mayfield affirmed, adding that she had checked with Charlie Jones.

Mr. Bealer recalled a community meeting when an additional stop sign was suggested at the intersection of

Warren and Lackawanna Streets. Dr. Chapman clarified that the neighbors wanted a stop sign on Warren Street to control busses making left turns to Lackawanna Street. He said the District would be amenable to this request. Mr. Bealer suggested that the cycle and timing of the traffic lights also be considered to help alleviate the congestion.

Mr. Miller noted that the City Engineer's comments on the prior submission had been addressed, according to his most recent review. Mr. Bealer asked what effect the season's hurricanes played in the construction schedule. Ms. Deye responded that the backorders had only affected trailers, not the modular components for this project.

Mr. McCarthy stated that the County Planning comments had been addressed, making special reference to the stormwater plan.

Mr. Raffaelli described Glenside as a proud elementary school, built in 1929 with additions and renovations in 1939 and 1949. He agreed that the increasing school population and expanding curriculum necessitated additional space. He called the project a compromise between that need and the fiscal reality, but doubted the lifespan of the architecture and materials chosen. He said the Glenside site could accommodate a more ambitious project to serve a larger student population. He recognized the traffic problems at Glenside, and so many other nearby schools and neighboring districts, adding that the problem had more to do with parent drop-off than bus drop-off. He implored the District to address the issue. Mr. Bealer noted that a letter from the Police Department had been sent home to parents of Riverside Elementary students regarding the parent drop-off, wondering if the same had reached other parents in the District.

Mr. Miller asked about the record of the parcel and the need for a clearer legal description. Mr. McCarthy mentioned the urban practice of describing parcels in relation to adjacent streets and the interior angles of their intersections. He said that a bearing base had since been established, those bearings now appearing on the plan.

Mr. Bealer motioned to grant preliminary/final approval to the Glenside project, subject to receipt of the improvements agreement, the approved sewer module, all other applicable permits, and a waiving of the monumentation requirement; these conditions to be reflected on a revised cover sheet. Mr. Rothermel seconded the motion. And the Commission approved unanimously, 4 yeas to 0 nays.

Resolution #44-2005

Review the preliminary land development plan for the Thomas Ford Elementary - School of Science, a magnet school proposed for the Reading School District property known as 1020 Old Wyomissing Road.

Mr. Guida, referring to opportunities at the Act 34 hearing and re-zoning hearing concerning the project, noted that no adverse public comment had been associated with the Thomas Ford proposal, drawing the distinction between it and the Glenside experience.

Mr. McCarthy referred to the Planning staff and Public Works' reviews. He stated that buffering had been added around the off-street parking area. He requested a similar understanding regarding the improvements agreement, and a waiving of the monumentation requirement, as with the Glenside project. He said additional study of the stormwater capacity had been performed per the request of the City Engineer.

Mr. Guida said a traffic study would likely be submitted in the coming week, noting that the request for said study had come late in the process.

Mr. Bealer asked if Margaret Street was used for on-street parking. Ms. Deye said buses unload along Margaret Street, indicating the proposed off-street parking for the School. Dr. Chapman added that signs would be installed to clarify parking restrictions.

Mr. Rothermel asked why the axis of the proposed School deviates from the existing structure. Ms. Deye said the footprint had been rotated for topographic considerations and the grade transition between the finished floor elevations. She felt it was preferable to have the front façade facing the intersection of Margaret Street and East Wyomissing Boulevard, instead of the tree line.

Mr. McCarthy said the County Planning concerns were similar to the Glenside comments.

Ms. Deye stated that the name of the School was being changed to "School of Technology and Communication". Referring to samples of the façade materials, she described a pre-finished standing seam roof, a combination of split-faced and smooth-faced masonry in brick colors to compliment the existing building, and aluminum door and window frames. She said pediments and arches are also intended to reflect the design of the existing structure.

Mr. Miller asked about the accuracy of the elevations shown. Ms. Deye said the slope does rise gradually from the front, hiding the entrance slightly. Mr. Rothermel asked about any roof-top equipment and associated screening. Ms. Deye mentioned some small heating/cooling systems to be placed on the roof, in an effort to reduce noise in the classroom. She assured that the units would not be visible from the surrounding sidewalks. She said the height of the building would be thirteen (13) feet, base to parapet. She felt any attempt to screen the units would

only make them more obvious. She said the roof (black ethylene propylene without ballast) slopes toward drains in the center, further reducing visibility of the heating/cooling units.

Mr. Raffaelli asked about the different zoning treatment between this and the Glenside project. Mr. Guida mentioned the District's intent to sell the neighboring "education center" parcel to the Hospital and the Hospital's subsequent offer to join in a joint re-zoning petition so as to avoid the appearance of spot-zoning. He called the Zoning Hearing Board's decisions as "past history". He said the District stands to receive \$1.5 million for a property no one else would want for \$800,000. Mr. Raffaelli characterized it as a give-away by the District, citing the lifecycle of the proposed building as a less efficient use of taxpayer money.

Mr. Rothermel inquired about the proposed site lighting. Mr. McCarthy described some corner building lights and 17-foot, high-pressure sodium fixtures for the parking area. Mr. Rothermel suggested metal halide lamps for their color rendition benefits, recognizing drawbacks in energy efficiency.

Mr. Raffaelli recalled the construction of Thomas Ford Elementary in 1954 and an addition in 1958, following the close of the elementary school in Oakbrook. He recognized the challenge of expansion on this particular parcel, given the topography and placement of the original building. He stated that the District's population had remained steady at around 15,000 to 15,500 students, even as the City population fluctuated between 130,000 and 80,000. He called the current enrollment, at over 17,000, an "anomaly".

Mr. Bealer asked about the macadam play area shown between the buildings. He cited durability and appearance issues with macadamed areas at other schools, suggesting concrete be used instead. Mr. Raffaelli felt the District had previously taken on tasks it wasn't prepared to handle "in-house". He cited the planting strip turned macadam along Margaret Street. Dr. Chapman mentioned a priority list of the District's goals, and offered to share it from his office.

Mr. Rothermel commended the District for producing an interesting design, adding that more attention should be given to the alignment of the buildings, in case there was ever a need to join the two. Ms. Deye stated that the current regulations wouldn't allow it.

Mr. Rothermel motioned to grant preliminary/final approval to the Thomas Ford project, with a waiver of the monumentation requirement, and subject to the submission of an improvements agreement and traffic study to the Department of Public Works. Mr. Reppert seconded the motion. And the Commission voted unanimously to approve, 4 yeas to 0 nays.

Resolution #45-2005

Review the final land development plan for the Reading Hospital and Medical Center - School of Health Sciences, a technical school and (future) dormitory proposed for those parcels known as 1001 and 1025 Old Wyomissing Road.

Mr. Raffaelli noted that the plan is being considered for final approval. The agenda called it a preliminary plan.

Mr. Roland, attorney for the Hospital, reminded the Commission of previous presentations. He noted the review letters from Planning staff and Public Works. Mr. King said those comments were incorporated into the revised drawings, now appropriately signed and notarized. Asked about the off-street parking configuration, he stated that the parking was provided according to the Zoning Ordinance standards. He said the 24 spaces in the western side of the site would be naturally screened by the eight-foot difference in elevation between them and the right-of-way, and further screened by a retaining wall and landscaping planted. Mr. Roland said that relief from the parking minimum was never requested, adding the need for the additional parking to keep the pressure off the surrounding neighborhood.

Mr. Miller recalled a conversation with the Zoning Administrator where it was determined that the parking standard was varied. Whether it was or not is irrelevant in this scenario, as there are no parking maximums. A developer can build as much parking as will fit, subject to the setback and impervious coverage regulations. And those regulations were varied.

Mr. Raffaelli asked why the parking was being expanded when restrictions are to be imposed on student parking. Mr. Mable mentioned special occasions, students arriving/departing for the semester, events in the auditorium, etc. He shared the aesthetic concerns, but noted the "weekly" complaints he receives regarding parking impacts in the neighborhood. Mr. Roland restated the attempts made to soften the appearance and noted the shuttle service available throughout the Hospital campus.

Mr. Bealer inquired about the findings of traffic study and the current considerations for the paved triangle to the west. Mr. King said the study submitted accounts for the Thomas Ford Elementary traffic, as well as the Hospital's. He said improvements are necessary at the intersection of Museum Road and Parkside Drive South.

They have no designs on the adjacent triangle, an off-site improvement.

Mr. Miller reminded that the terms of the Zoning Hearing Board decision are not relevant to the additional parking, except to the extent that setback and impervious coverage standards were varied to enable it. He said the approval of the plan cannot hinge on this issue. He hoped the Hospital would provide some commitment on the plan to restrict student parking. Mr. Roland noted the City Engineer's request to restudy the traffic conditions if the shuttle service were ever discontinued. He hesitated to commit to anything further, in case a violation of parking policies could be deemed a violation of the land development plan. Mr. Raffaelli hoped for some assurance that the lot would not be for daily use by students shuttling between the School and the Hospital.

Mr. Reppert felt the screening designed addressed the visual impact. Mr. Rothermel cited the terms of the Zoning Ordinance that do regulate the maximum build-out. He said they are too often varied, creating other impacts. He felt the Hospital made a good attempt to treat the visual impact, in this case. Mr. Miller repeated that an alternative design is being *requested*, not imposed.

Mr. Bealer had concerns about the potential time between a cessation of shuttle service and completion of a revised traffic study. Mr. Bressler stated that the problems exist today, and the improvements proposed will handle the increased traffic potential. He said all intersections are at "levels of service C or D", levels of B being typically acceptable in urban areas.

Mr. Raffaelli asked about the turning radius for eastbound traffic on Museum Road making right turns on Parkside Drive South. Mr. Brady said the radius is adequate for traffic complying with the speed limit (35mph). Mr. Raffaelli said school busses won't be seen there, noting their tendency to take Parkview Road through West Reading Borough to access Penn Avenue.

Mr. Brady stated their receipt and compliance with the County Planning review, understanding the dormitory will be considered as a separate project. He said they are still awaiting the Conservation District's input.

Mr. Roland indicated that the Hospital is hoping the School District will address the merging of the two separate parcels, adding that the Hospital will have it done if the District does not.

Mr. Miller asked for an explanation of the design of the 'arbor entrance'. Mr. King described a tiered-approach, brick pavers and ADA-compliant ramps. He said they are still struggling with the design of the entrance, trying to effect a plaza atmosphere with sufficient and inviting gathering space.

Mr. Reppert motioned to approve the final plan, subject to all other required permits and submission of an improvements agreement. Mr. Rothermel seconded the motion. And the Commission voted unanimously to approve the final plan, 4 yeas to 0 nays.

Resolution #46-2005

Other business

Proposed Zoning Map amendment/re-zoning petition for the Neversink Mountain properties south of Fairview Street, submitted by All County & Associates on behalf of DMO Properties, the Berks County Conservancy and the City of Reading, joint petitioners.

Mr. Lehmann introduced himself and Larry Lloyd for the Conservancy. He noted a good working relationship with the administration in on-going negotiations of the past 18 months. He referred to the illustrations his firm prepared to show ownership, slope angles, and a possible layout for 52 townhouses. He said they attempted to limit the development to the lower, flatter slopes, in order to minimize impact on the steeper grades. He said the unneeded land was proposed for preservation zoning. Mr. Lloyd cited the County Comprehensive Plan and a 1996 development feasibility study for Neversink Mountain.

Mr. Rothermel asked why the Conservancy doesn't petition for the preservation zoning alone, as the Conservancy and the City already own most of the land. Mr. Lehmann answered that some parcels were privately-owned and subject to development under current zoning. He said the Conservancy preferred a more "harmonious" development strategy. He noted that of the 6.05 acres in the development area, they propose to build on 3.37 acres and return 2.65 to the Conservancy.

Mr. Rothermel asked about All County & Associates' experience developing steep slopes. Mr. Lehmann noted the firm's extensive experience in eastern Pennsylvania, with projects ranging from one unit to 789. Mr. Rothermel wondered if more sensitive designs were considered, as an alternative to extending the standard urban grid further up the Mountain. He recalled a 1974 redevelopment study by Rahenkamp Sachs Wells & Associates that suggested a development pattern focused on the milder grades and existing rail bed. He called it a much more extensive scenario, but noted the proposed curvilinear streets following the topography. He said any extension of the existing streets ought to include connections for the sake of circulation in to, and out of, the new development.

Mr. Lehmann felt the confines of the grid presented a much clearer boundary between development and preservation.

Mr. Rothermel recalled those provisions of the Land Development Ordinance governing maximum grades of streets and prohibiting dead-end-streets. Mr. Lehmann said they would be seeking waivers from those requirements at the land development phase, noting that the design of cul-de-sacs would severely restrict the development potential. He felt all of the concerns voiced by the City's professionals could be satisfactorily addressed. He said stormwater capacity would be calculated, intending to infiltrate the 2 to 5-year flows on-site. Mr. Rothermel reiterated his hope for a more topographically appropriate design. Mr. Lehmann mentioned the financial viability of the proposal.

Mr. Bealer agreed with Mr. Rothermel's comments and asked about the remaining R-1A zone, concerned about the possibility of a spot-zoning challenge. Mr. Lehmann indicated that it was another private holding not affecting their proposal. Mr. Miller stated the concept of spot zoning related more to the benefits conferred on specific parties, rather than specific numbers of parcels or acreage.

Mr. Lehmann said the Fire Chief could "work with" the street width, though wider streets were preferred with better turning radii for emergency vehicles. He noted additional access points through the playground, hydrants proposed for the ends of the extended streets, and a proposed looping water system.

When asked about the specifications of the common walls, Mr. Lehmann said they would be built to code, agreeing that there are privacy concerns in addition to fire protection. He expanded on the strategy for handling stormwater flows, saying water not infiltrated would be directed into the municipal infrastructure, including some flow from the slopes above. He said soil conditions would be assessed to determine the recharge potential.

Mr. Miller repeated the two obvious conflicts with the Land Development Ordinance, adding that more may arise when more detailed plans are in-hand. He said the Commission is not required to take any action, but the thirty-day planning agency comment period (required by §609(c) of the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code) is expiring. The Ordinance has already been introduced to City Council, with action expected at the coming Monday meeting. Mr. Lehmann concurred, reminding the Commission that their recommendation concerns the zoning itself, and not the land development.

Mr. Rothermel said he supports the concept of some low-density development on the lower-angled, lower elevations in an effort to permanently preserve the upper part of the Mountain. He recommended that other alternative site plans be examined before any zoning revisions are considered. Mr. Reppert seconded the opinion. And the Commission agreed to the recommendation, 4 to 0.

Minutes

Mr. Raffaelli asked for action on the November Planning Commission minutes. Mr. Rothermel motioned to approve the November minutes. Mr. Reppert seconded. The Commission approved the November minutes, as presented, unanimously, 4 to 0.

2006 Planning Commission meeting schedule

Mr. Raffaelli suggested that future meetings start at 7:00 pm, hoping to end the meetings at a more reasonable time, without denying any project a comprehensive, detailed review. Support for the changing the meeting time was unanimous. Mr. Miller mentioned that the schedule was subject to change, depending on the outcome of a planned meeting between the Commission and the Zoning Hearing Board. He said the second Tuesdays are free of holiday conflicts in 2006, as well as the fourth Tuesdays if an additional monthly meeting is still being considered. Mr. Rothermel suggested consulting Berks Community Television prior to finalizing schedules.

Mr. Raffaelli noted the removal of the newly planted trees from the firehouse property at 200 Penn Street, subsequent to the cease and desist order on the parking lot alterations. Mr. Miller indicated that he was told the site is being prepared for a replacement trellis and that plans will be submitted.

Mr. Raffaelli alluded to the continued efforts to enforce another City directive and the inaction by certain staff.

With no further business, Mr. Reppert motioned to adjourn the December meeting. Mr. Bealer seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to adjourn the December meeting, 4 to 0. – 11:04 pm.