

Minutes
Regular meeting of the City of Reading Planning Commission
December 22, 2009 at 7:00 pm

Members present:

Ermete J. Raffaelli, Chairman
Brian Bingaman, Vice Chairman
Michael E. Lauter, Secretary
Wayne Jonas Bealer, Assistant Secretary
Frederic dep Rothermel Jr.

Staff present:

Andrew W. Miller, Planning Office

Others present:

Thomas B. Ludgate, Ludgate Engineering Corporation
William J. Vitale, Designworks Architects, PC
Modesto D. Fiume, Opportunity House (Reading-Berks Emergency Shelter)
Chris Reber, Reading Eagle Company

Chairman Raffaelli called the December 22nd meeting to order, and asked for acceptance of the agenda. Mr. Lauter moved to accept the December agenda. Mr. Bingaman seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to accept the December 22nd agenda.

Subdivision and Land Development:

2nd Street Learning Center (Opportunity House) - preliminary subdivision/land development plan [0:01.23]

Mr. Ludgate described the proposed location and orientation to the existing Opportunity House facilities. He said the addition's architectural front would face Beech Street, which is being vacated by the City in order to serve Opportunity House's drop-off and parking needs. He indicated the additional parking planned on the west side of Pear Street. He said the plan will effect a consolidation of several constituent parcels leftover from the houses since demolished. He noted the landscaping and street trees proposed, and a courtyard area in the center of the building and opening toward Pear Street. He said some additional Opportunity House property, separated by the one remaining house (446 Pear), will remain as 'open space' for now. Asked about the traffic pattern, Mr. Ludgate explained that, except for the vacated Beech Street, there are no changes proposed to existing cartway widths or travel directions. He recognized the emergency access considerations, as well. Discussion continued about previous conceptual versions of the building plan and the Reading School District's one-time involvement in the project.

Mr. Vitale presented architectural renderings, floor plans, and sample façade materials. He described utility and service areas of the existing facility, to be shared with the addition. He said meals would continue to be prepared and delivered by the School District. He indicated the handicapped-accessible entrances, and the building connection via an existing stairwell. He said the Learning Center will be independently-staffed, and anticipated as many as 20 new employees to be hired. He said that an alley currently separating the existing Shelter from the Learning Center parcels would disappear with the lot consolidation; Opportunity House owns every property on either side. Describing the interior of the Learning Center, he said the classrooms will feature day-lighting from multiple sides, including a clerestory. He expected the project to be certified according to the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) rating system, but wasn't sure what level it would attain. He said the design reduces the demand for artificial lighting and other operating costs. He said the roof will be constructed from large structurally-insulated panels (SIPs), minimizing joints, and together with high-performance windows, improving efficiency. He said the open-ceiling, exposed-truss design will enhance the natural lighting. He said every classroom will include a computer, complimenting the technology-education focus of the project. A standing-seam metal roof and cistern will allow for rainwater collection. The foundation will be built from locally-produced (New Holland Concrete) and colored concrete masonry units (CMUs). The remainder of the façade will be fiber-cement siding (over 4-foot by 8-foot panels), with a pre-finished color and other maintenance benefits over wood or vinyl sidings. He said the earth-tone colors prevailing would be highlighted by some primary colors, in keeping with the early-childhood focus of the project. He expected the window frames to be a mill-finished aluminum, for its cost benefit and recycled material content.

Asked if the “multi-purpose room” shown might be used for public events or presentations, Mr. Fiume answered that he didn’t anticipate anything other than Opportunity House’s board meetings and maybe occasional “open-house” events. Mr. Rothermel wondered if any consideration had been given to a multi-story design, suggesting that the utilization of available land be considered in the ‘environmental scoring’ of the project. He felt the single-story construction too “suburban” in its look and scale. Mr. Vitale said that had been their preference early on, until some preliminary budgeting ruled it out, citing the extra costs associated with required stair towers, an elevator, and foundation modifications. He noted the one-story preference for academic settings as an additional consideration. Mr. Ludgate briefly explained the different categories used to score the ‘green-ness’ of projects. Continuing with the description of the construction, Mr. Vitale mentioned the wood-truss roofing, paneled wood-frame wall construction, and a “fully sprinklered” fire suppression system.

Mr. Miller recommended tabling the plan, until some additional review of the engineering issues was provided. He said the County Planning review didn’t identify any major issues, and acknowledged that the zoning matters had been satisfied in advance. Otherwise satisfied with the detail provided, he suggested moving ahead with a final plan application for the January meeting. Mr. Ludgate confirmed that the erosion and sedimentation control planning was under review, by the reconstituted Berks County Conservation District. Asked about the planned use of the parking lot, Mr. Fiume said it would be for employees and visitors to Opportunity House’s existing health dispensary. Mr. Ludgate explained that an existing utility pole stands in the way of an aligned (with Beech Street) entrance to the parking area, trying to save the cost of its relocation.

Mr. Bealer moved to table the plan, pending further review. Mr. Bingaman seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to table Opportunity House’s preliminary plan.

Other business:

§513.a approval reaffirmation-South Campus Project (Alvernia University) [0:47.40]

Mr. Miller expected that someone would attend the meeting on Alvernia’s behalf to explain the situation. He reported that the project was substantially complete, yet the land development plan had never been recorded. He recalled having visited the site shortly after receiving the Conservation District’s approval of the erosion and sedimentation controls, and saw the first stories of two new dormitories already constructed. He said building permits were apparently issued, a not-uncommon misstep between the Planning Office and building officials. He said Alvernia now needs occupancy permits; *ergo* a zoning permit. And the current Zoning Administrator has determined the project required a special exception hearing. He explained that the previous zoning administrator never issued a zoning permit, but a letter seeking more information and an appointment. He said the Planning Office was never copied on that letter, but that a copy had been provided by the project engineer. He recalled the Planning Commission having been up against the Planning Code deadline, and approving the plan on the condition of the Conservation District’s approval. He mentioned that there had been a preliminary and limited Conservation District approval, early on, but only of that disturbance necessary for the sewer tie-in. He said that it was the Law Department’s position that the plan approval be reaffirmed anyway, and endorsed. He assumed the suddenly-renewed interest had something to do with the project’s financiers demanding evidence of the municipal approval.

Members wondered if the City could compel new zoning applications and hearings after it appeared the City had given even tacit approval of the project. Mr. Miller clarified that the letter from the Zoning Office, while apparently signifying the design was compliant, sought more information and a meeting. Mr. Bealer suggested the Commission delay its action pending resolution of the zoning questions. Mr. Rothermel added that he would like to hear directly from Alvernia’s representatives, noting their many previous projects reviewed by the City. Mr. Miller said he was instructed to convey the Law Department’s opinion. Mr. Raffaelli offered an opportunity to make a motion.

Hearing none, he moved on to the issues surrounding the impact of the new athletic field on neighboring homes. Mr. Miller called it a separate issue, but noted an inconsistency between the apparent use of the field and Alvernia’s represented intentions for it, when it was originally proposed.

review the draft November 24, 2009 meeting minutes [1:00.51]

Mr. Rothermel moved to approve the November meeting minutes, as presented. Mr. Lauter seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to accept the November 24th meeting minutes.

Resolution #60-2009

Mr. Bealer reported that the Blighted Property Review Committee, at its December 17th meeting, concluded that the

Planning Commission should moved ahead with its 'recommendations for reuse' on two more of the blight-certified properties, including 212 South 8th Street where the Review Committee prefers the same general resolution language applied to the others. Mr. Miller suggested waiting until some of the questions previously raised by the Commission were answered, and for a consensus on the area's future zoning. Mr. Bealer said that the Reading Redevelopment Authority has lately been more cooperative in planning for the custody of properties taken, and that the Review Committee's staff is researching the questions and contingencies on those properties not yet addressed by the Commission.

Mr. Rothermel offered thanks to Berks Community Television for their many years of broadcasting the Planning Commission's meetings. He understood this may be the last of that coverage, due to the City withdrawing its financial support, and lamented the loss of a medium so able to educate and involve the community in local government affairs.

Mr. Lauter moved to adjourn the December meeting. Mr. Bingaman seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to adjourn the December 22nd meeting. - 8:11 pm.