

**Minutes**  
**Regular meeting of the City of Reading Planning Commission**  
**December 9, 2008 at 7:00 pm**

**Members present:**

Ermete J. Raffaelli, Chairman  
Michael E. Lauter, Secretary  
Wayne Jonas Bealer, Assistant Secretary  
Frederic dep Rothermel, Jr.  
Edmund Palka

**Staff present:**

Andrew W. Miller, Planning Office  
Michelle R. Mayfield, Department of Law

**Others present:**

Albert R. Boscov, Reading Hospitality, LLC  
Adam Mukerji, Reading Redevelopment Authority  
Lawrence H. Lee, Reading Parking Authority  
Gregg A. Bogia, Bogia Engineering Inc.  
Lee C. Olsen, Olsen Design Group Architects  
Scott W. Weber, Olsen Design Group Architects  
Sun-Hee Hwang, Timothy Haahs & Associates, Inc.  
David A. Kostival, Reading Eagle Company

Chairman Raffaelli called the December 9th meeting to order, asked presenters to sign in, and asked for acceptance of the agenda. Mr. Lauter moved to accept the December agenda. Mr. Palka seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to accept the December 9th agenda.

**Subdivision and Land Development:**

Review the **preliminary** land development plan for the **DoubleTree Hotel & Garage Project**, a subdivision, a convention-center hotel, its accessory uses, and a municipal parking structure proposed for that parcel known as 701 Penn Street [0:01.09]

Mr. Bogia began with the orientation of the site, and the general placement of the Hotel and Garage structures. He indicated the Garage entrances; separated for the general public and the Hotel guests. He described decorative hardscaping planned for the Hotel entrance. He said parking for the 217 Hotel rooms would be reserved in the 776-space Garage.

Mr. Hwang, presenting the Garage portion, explained its layout, capacity and entrance/exit points. He called it a "double-threaded" design, with certain circulation benefits. He said it would appear as 7 levels on the North 7th Street side, and 6 on the North 8th Street side. He presented elevations depicting the 3 stair/elevator towers, and the vehicular entries and exits. He described the construction as a precast-concrete system.

Mr. Olsen continued, referring to a "positive" meeting the previous week with the City's "OneStopShop" code-advisory forum. He noted some issues with the land transfer. Reviewing the site plan, he explained the intended circulation through the Hotel's porte-cochère, the hallway through the reception area and restaurant, through the kitchen area, the junior ballroom and an amphitheater-style meeting space, with audio-visual presentation amenities. He estimated 12,000 square feet of meeting/banquet space with 'prefunction' areas. He explained the locations of the loading docks in the rear of the building, and a pool and fitness facility in the basement level. He said the soil borings identified some stability issues necessitating a pile-foundation design. For the 7-story room tower, he mentioned three possible variations on the floor layouts, and handicapped-accessible corner suites that can be converted for additional meeting spaces, bringing the total space available to 20,000 square feet. He said an outdoor deck area on the first floor's roof will combine with a partially-vegetated (sedum) roof, for the stormwater management benefit. He described the tower's construction as a steel frame with composite metal decking, and poured concrete floors on first level. He explained the façade treatment as brick and tinted glass, and without any ventilation (louvers) projections through the exterior walls. He said the air intake and exhaust would be designed through the top, for a cleaner look. He said the windows would be operable (about 4 to 5 inches, opened), per the DoubleTree guidelines. LED accent lighting will be incorporated into the finished façade. And the

bar/restaurant is being designed with 75 to 100 feet of sidewalk café space and, ideally, an open-air option to the interior. Mechanical equipment will be mounted on the roof, and screened. A photovoltaic system is under consideration for the hot water supply [?]. Mr. Olsen said the color palette hadn't yet been finalized, but he hoped to have examples in-time for the final presentation. He said the Hilton officials in Memphis were pleased with the progress of their design.

Mr. Boscov felt pressed to make a presentation at the December meeting, intending to use the preliminary design to solicit cost estimates. He said the current lending environment was complicating an otherwise ready project, already having secured the necessary private investments and State grants. He said he had lately been experiencing similar challenges in his efforts to reclaim and stabilize Boscov's, Inc. He characterized the preliminary plan as far from the detail necessary for firm bids, but remained confident in eventual success. He regretted the interior designer's absence, but expected her attendance at the next presentation. He explained further the design of the floor layouts, assuring that everything about it met, not only the standards of the DoubleTree trademark, but for Hilton as well, still hoping to apply that more-recognizable name. He welcomed the Commission's suggestions, but noted the time constraint, fearing the loss of grants already awarded. He estimated 15 to 18 months in construction.

Mr. Lee said that the Parking Authority enthusiastically supports the Hotel project, had already arranged the funding for the Garage project, and was ready to move ahead. He considered Timothy Haahs & Associates among the premier architects in the United States. He said the Garage design was prepared to move ahead of Hotel, and believed it should, given the limited work area and need for the parking capacity on the Hotel's opening. Mr. Boscov called it a "joint venture", and hoped bids for the Garage project come in as anticipated. He thought the recent slide in material prices might help offset the mortgage factor, for the project overall. He said contractors were able and available.

Asked about the outward finish of the Garage, Mr. Hwang acknowledged the precast concrete, but noted flexibility in its coloring and the need to consider the Hotel. He also thought metal screen elements would add visual interest. Mr. Lee also spoke to concrete's flexibility in pigmentation and veneer treatments. Mr. Palka asked about the non-Hotel availability of the Garage. Mr. Lee likened its use to the Authority's others; available for monthly leases and special events. Mr. Boscov realized the need to replace over 400 existing surface parking spaces, and plan for the potential tenancy of nearby office buildings. Asked about the windows within the Hotel, Mr. Olsen noted the Hilton requirement to provide the guest rooms a glass area equal to 10% of the bedroom floor area. He said the operability will yield natural ventilation, without compromising safety. He thought different levels of tint could be applied to the different faces of the building, depending on their solar orientation.

Mr. Rothermel wondered about the height of Garage, with regard to other City garages. Mr. Lee answered "lower" than the Reed and Court Garage, but still requiring a zoning variance. Mr. Boscov thought the mass of the Hotel would hide most of the Garage from the Penn Street view. Mr. Rothermel stressed color differentiation in addressing the structural mass.

Mr. Rothermel wondered why the room tower was designed for the site's western end, along the railroad. Mr. Olsen said a variety of designs were considered, and concluded that: no tower should be above the ballroom, needing to keep its spaces 'column-free', likewise over the junior ballroom and amphitheater, where the necessary truss design would add significant cost, nor against the Garage, where the views from a substantial portion of the rooms would be compromised. When considering the elevator positions and their access to service areas, and the operational recommendations of Valley Forge Investment Corporation, the current form took shape. Mr. Rothermel said the reasons given assume the grade-level floor plan to be fixed, suggesting different placements of the ballrooms and amphitheater. Mr. Olsen said the elimination of the second floor, for program spaces, made the design all the more restrictive. Mr. Boscov said "triple glass" would be used to block noise from the railroad.

Mr. Rothermel wondered how, without a mid-block connection, those parking at the Poplar and Walnut Garage would reach the Sovereign Center. Mr. Lee referred to the pedestrian corridor along the railroad, to remain. Mr. Rothermel thought visitors seemed reluctant to use it, opting instead to cross the existing surface lot. Mr. Miller suggested that reluctance had something to do with the darkened areas under the Washington and Court Street overpasses. Mr. Bogia said they've planned for lighting similar to that in "Entertainment Square", at North 2nd and Washington Streets. Asked about the corridor specifically, he had nothing planned.

The question and answer session continued. About garage lighting, Mr. Lee explained the fluorescent lighting retrofit on-going throughout the Authority's facilities, to be complete by late February. Mr. Weber confirmed that at least 20% of the Hotel rooms will have doors connecting them directly to other rooms, for convertibility, per Hilton's guidelines. Mr. Olsen explained the multiple points of egress, and the different levels of the first-floor space, in response to a concern about evacuations. Mr. Miller reported that the Police Department and

traffic planners intend to eventually discontinue the usual blockade of Penn Street's 600 and 700 blocks for Sovereign Center events. Mr. Bogia felt the 7th Street pedestrian corridor a benefit, for focusing the pedestrian traffic to a single crossing, and in-line with the Sovereign Center's entrance. Asked about street tree plantings, Mr. Boscov proposed the Penn and Court Street frontages, at least, given their sidewalk widths; 16 feet and 13 feet respectively. Mr. Olsen confirmed they'd maintain the current width of Penn Street sidewalk, but for a possible bus drop-off, which they recognized as a potential conflict with the intended outdoor dining. Responding to a concern about a blank stretch along the Penn Street façade, Mr. Olsen suggested coloration, and articulations in the masonry to augment that 300 feet span. Mr. Boscov confirmed plans to install matching bishop's crook street lamps on their Penn Street frontage, hoping to begin the overall redress of Penn Street's lighting shortly. Mr. Bealer noted different lamp styles within the pedestrian corridor, as well. Mr. Olsen included the building's lighting as another important element, thinking the Hotel might one day serve as a passenger train terminal for a revived service to Philadelphia. Mr. Bogia mentioned his contact with Norfolk Southern Corporation, whose representatives seemed amenable to the development plans, and potential improvements to the pedestrian corridor. Mr. Olsen stated that the Zoning Hearing Board would be considering the requested relief at their hearing the following night.

Mr. Lauter wondered if eastbound Penn Street traffic would be permitted left turns into the Hotel entrance, expecting back-ups to the west and across the railroad tracks. Mr. Bogia admitted that possibility, but presumed the motorist's responsibility. Mr. Miller noted frequent "false alarms" in the crossing gates, from trains assembling in the nearby Spring Street Yard.

Mr. Lauter asked about public art requirements or contributions. Mr. Mukerji recalled the Redevelopment Authority's elimination of that policy. Mr. Boscov suggested the LED accent lighting as an artistic component, likening his vision to Philadelphia's Cira Centre, next to the 30th Street Station. Asked if there were any chance of a mural being applied to the Hotel's façade, and citing the controversial installation on the Sovereign Plaza as an example, Mr. Boscov doubted the Hilton guidelines would allow it. Mr. Rothermel, in recognizing Mr. Boscov's mission to encourage downtown activity, cautioned against the effect of long, blank walls. Mr. Olsen suggested a myriad of opportunities for treating it through the design and detail of the masonry.

Mr. Boscov referred to an erroneous report in the *Reading Eagle* newspaper regarding the financial state of the Hotel project, and a supposed request from the Mayor for additional State funding. He assured the start-up funding arranged; a long-term financing arrangement yet to be. Mr. Lauter wondered about the sufficiency of the pedestrian corridor to handle the anticipated volume. Mr. Rothermel insisted that someone take responsibility for improving the section between Penn and Washington Streets as a defined and coordinated channel, and immediately recognizable to visitors exiting the Poplar and Walnut Garage. Mr. Boscov proposed lighting as a starting point. Mr. Miller thought it tolerable as it is, but with definite room for pedestrian-sensitive improvements. He thought the stretch bordering the Poplar and Walnut Garage well-designed, suggesting they take their cues from the way its stair tower engages both the corridor and the transition to the Washington Street level, a high point attractive for mid-block street crossings. He believed most of the ingress/egress from/to that southwest corner, due to the numbers of County employees parking there. Mr. Rothermel appreciated the design, colors and detailing of the Poplar and Walnut, Front and Washington, and 2nd and Washington Garages, calling them "sympathetic" to their neighborhoods, and hoping the proposed Garage would follow similarly. Asked about the relocation of the existing surface parking, Mr. Lee counted 125 available spaces in the South Penn Garage and another 300 in BARTA's Park-N-Transit Garage; enough for everyone displaced. Mr. Olsen hoped to begin the Hotel construction by late spring/early summer. Mr. Hwang estimated a March start for the Garage, and foundation work even sooner. Mr. Olsen said the two structures would share parts of the foundation. He noted the logistics issues stemming from the close proximity. Mr. Mukerji suggested the 7th and Washington Lot as possible "lay-down space". Mr. Lee said he knew of five contractors ready to take-on the Garage project, and remained confident in the budget. The slide in material prices was again cited.

Ms. Mayfield advised tabling the plan, pending receipt of the County Planning Commission's review and the necessary zoning relief. Mr. Lee asked about proceeding with the Garage portion, the Parking Authority apparently ready to move ahead with or without the Hotel design. Mr. Miller noted alot of work to complete on the plan, regardless of the County review and zoning issues. He said he reviewed it as submitted, as one project. He said it was up to the developer to tell him, noting that they still haven't made a final decision on subdivision, and are naming the Redevelopment Authority as the developer. Mr. Boscov reconsidered his initial, and overly-optimistic time frame.

Mr. Bealer moved to table the preliminary plan, pending the County Planning review and resolution of the zoning issues. Mr. Lauter seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to table the DoubleTree Hotel &

Garage preliminary plan. Mr. Raffaelli extended the offer of a special meeting, if necessary to move the project forward.

**Other business:**

the demolition/construction debris at the Buttonwood Gateway [2:10.51]

Mr. Rothermel voiced his appreciation of the progress with the Buttonwood Gateway redevelopment, but objected to the left-over demolition/construction debris, and the presentation to traffic entering the City from the view from the Buttonwood Street Bridge. Mr. Boscov said the clean-up and final grading has been delayed by the search for a developer of that third and final parcel, and the construction of the Goggleworks Apartments project. Soil removed from that site at North 2nd and Washington Streets will be used as fill in the Buttonwood Gateway. He estimated “a month or two” to begin clearing-up and re-grading the site. Mr. Rothermel complimented the appearance of the Sun Rich Fresh Foods and Hydrojet projects, while deploring the effect of the foreground. Mr. Boscov mentioned negotiations with a potential tenant to fill the third parcel.

review the draft October 14, 2008 meeting minutes [2:20.19]

Mr. Rothermel asked for some additional clarification of his statements. Mr. Palka moved to accept the October minutes, as revised. Mr. Bealer seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to approve the revised October 14th meeting minutes.

**Resolution #75-2008**

review the draft November 13, 2008 meeting minutes [2:22.17]

Mr. Bealer moved to approve the November minutes, as presented. Mr. Palka seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to approve the November 13th meeting minutes.

**Resolution #76-2008**

§508.3 agreement to extension-Aramark Parking Lot - parking lot land development plan [2:23.34]

Mr. Miller reported Aramark’s request for a 90-day extension, moving the City’s review deadline to March 11, 2009. He reminded the Commission of the zoning issues in the design. He said he didn’t discover anything applicable to this particular lot when researching the history of Aramark’s zoning. Mr. Bealer moved to approve the 90-day extension. Mr. Lauter seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to agree to the new deadline of March 11th.

**Resolution #77-2008**

Mr. Raffaelli addressed the recent editorial letters criticizing the Redevelopment Authority’s decision not to convey land for Berks Women in Crisis’ new emergency shelter, and the suggestion that the Mayor intervene. He questioned the legality and politics of such a tactic.

Mr. Raffaelli asked for an update on efforts toward enacting a traffic-impact fee ordinance. Ms. Mayfield mentioned ongoing research into qualified firms and case studies, expecting to engage City Council within the first couple months of the new year.

Mr. Bealer moved to adjourn the December meeting. Mr. Palka seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to adjourn the December 9th meeting. – 9:32 pm.