

**Regular meeting of the City of Reading Planning Commission  
June 21, 2005 at 7:30 pm**

**Members present:**

Ermete Raffaelli, Chairman  
David Reppert, Vice Chairman  
Michael Lauter, Secretary  
Wayne Jonas Bealer, Assistant Secretary  
Edmund Palka  
Irvin Cohen

**Staff present:**

Andrew Miller, City Planner  
Joyce Ann Pressley, Manager, Planning and Zoning  
Adam Mukerji, Director, Community Development

**Others present:**

Albert Boscov, Reading's Future LLC  
Ken Pick, County of Berks  
Lee Olsen, Olsen deTurck Architects  
Scott Miller, Stackhouse Bensinger, Inc.  
Steve Bensinger, Stackhouse Bensinger, Inc.  
Doug Kramer, Synergetics Architects  
Justin Massie, Barry Isett & Associates  
Bryan Bollinger, McTish Kunkel & Associates  
Wayne Bowen, Schuylkill River Greenway Association  
Dwight Powell, Schuylkill River Greenway Association

**Minutes:**

Chairman Raffaelli called the June meeting to order, and reviewed the agenda. Mr. Lauter made a motion to approve the June agenda, and Mr. Cohen seconded. The Planning Commission approved the agenda, unanimously.

**Presentation of the proposed "Goggleworks Redevelopment Area", between Penn and Walnut Streets, Front and Third Streets.**

Mr. Mukerji greeted the Commission and introduced Mr. Pick, Community Development Director for the County of Berks. He reviewed the map, prepared as a suggestion by the County, and reminded the Commission that they have the final say on the boundary. He spoke briefly to the need for "parcel control" in their pursuit of master planning objectives around the new Goggleworks Art Center, slated for opening in September. He described some of the problems within the suggested boundary, as he and Mr. Pick saw them. He added that the Mayor felt the bus terminal on Third Street should be included. He reminded the Commission that the County was offering the services of its consultant in the survey and blight certification. Referring to a flow chart, he explained the process steps between the Commission, the Redevelopment Authority, and City Council.

Mr. Lauter expressed concern over their designating a redevelopment area without more specific ideas or proposals for redevelopment activity and funding. He wondered if it really is the Commission's plan, as opposed to a grant of permission to the Administration and the County.

Mr. Mukerji explained the Goggleworks will be the biggest community arts center of its kind in the Country. He feels that the neighborhood needs a face lift, certain properties in particular. He envisions live-work arrangements for the incoming artists, studios and coffee shops. He feels the Goggleworks, along with some other projects proposed or underway can be the catalyst to revitalizing the area, calling it a "critical mass". He explained the boundary proposed is still small enough to be "manageable".

Mr. Cohen agreed that the boundaries seemed to make sense, based on what he observed during a Commission tour of the area.

Andrew Miller assured the Commission that granting approval of a boundary just sets the process in motion and accepts the County's offer for consultation services, a win-win for the City.

Mr. Bealer asked about federal funding availability for upgrades and improvements should the Commission decide that relocations and demolitions were not necessary. Mr. Mukerji questioned the allocation of scarce CDBG

funds for the rehabilitation of certified blight. Mr. Pick added that the consultant will certify the blight and advise the City on funding possibilities. He commended the Commission for its concern in taking actions that affect property rights. He said the first step is to certify a boundary to direct the consultant's study. Mr. Mukerji, Mr. Pick, and Mr. Miller again reiterated the Commission's control over the process, and involvement at each step.

Mr. Palka made a motion to adopt the boundary as shown, reserving the right to modify the boundary at anytime throughout the redevelopment process. Mr. Reppert seconded the motion. And the Commission passed the resolution unanimously.

**Resolution #20-2005**

**Presentation of the request to expand the "Buttonwood Gateway Redevelopment Area",** eastward from Gordon Street to Schuylkill Avenue, between Buttonwood Street and the railroad right-of-way.

Mr. Mukerji addressed the maps showing the existing boundary and the expansion they'd like to make for the purpose of a residential element. He informed the Commission that the Buttonwood Gateway site (formerly American Chain & Cable) has been graded to a build-ready condition. He said opportunities for new businesses were being "actively pursued". He believed a market-rate housing project would complement the walk-to-work intent of the project as a whole. Financial assistance is being sought at the State level.

Mr. Pick likened this situation to the possibilities in the Goggleworks Redevelopment Area. He added that the Commission might also consider a formal rezoning. Mr. Mukerji reminded that the redevelopment area-designation trumps standard zoning provisions. He said that, unlike the Goggleworks Redevelopment Area, many properties in the Buttonwood neighborhood were in "advanced stages of disrepair".

Mr. Lauter again raised the issue of available funding. Mr. Mukerji said funding beyond CDBG was being explored, noting that federal funds come with too many strings attached (ie. relocations using CDBGs would require the City to actually find displaced parties new locations, in addition to paying the just compensation for the property taken.)

Mr. Bealer made a motion to approve the expansion of the Buttonwood Gateway Redevelopment Area, as shown on the map provided. Mr. Cohen seconded the motion. And the Commission passed the resolution unanimously.

**Resolution #21-2005**

**Review of the Pedestrian Walkway plan for Sovereign Plaza,** between Penn and Cherry Streets.

Mr. Olsen greeted the Commission and introduced Scott Miller and Al Boscov. He asked the Commission for final approval of this plan, with the understanding that they would return with amended plans, in the event that new storefronts were planned in the recently purchased Vito's Pizza building. This plan proposes a landscaping arrangement as if no development were to take place there.

Scott Miller reminded the Commission that this plan was prepared by their request at the time of final approval of the Sovereign Plaza project. He explained the eight-foot drop between Penn and Cherry Streets, and the design of the walkway. The developer is proposing a mix of vegetation, light fixtures, benches and textured concrete in a pattern that will contrast with the regular urban grid. He presented three-dimensional renderings of the different views through the corridor. The uninterrupted view, the lighting and the selection of landscaping will ensure a secure environment.

Mr. Olsen pointed out the construction joints between the areas of paving and landscaping, making a remodeling easier if the owner of the Vito's building opens storefronts to the walkway.

Andrew Miller asked for clarification on the ownership and maintenance arrangement. Mr. Olsen assured that it is Sovereign's responsibility as tenant. He has not been approached by anyone about possible easements or shared responsibility. Mr. Boscov said Reading's Future LLC preferred that Sovereign take full responsibility, citing their corporate image as an insurance of maintenance.

Scott Miller said the walkway construction is about to begin, and will be complete by the time of occupancy of the Sovereign building. He mentioned their lighting consultant who made sure the spacing and illumination concerns were adequately addressed. He said landscaping was chosen, in part, based on sunlight available in the corridor. Andrew Miller mentioned that a copy of the plan had been submitted for Shade Tree Commission review at their next meeting, July 11. He wondered if the "street tree" definition would keep Shade Tree Commission comments from having any meaning more than a recommendation.

Mr. Olsen reminded the Planning Commission that the owner, Reading's Future LLC, is still responsible for the stabilization of the party wall on the adjacent Vito's, again subject to the future façade plan of its new owners.

Mr. Bealer commended Reading's Future LLC for its forward vision and willingness to work around the possibilities for the adjacent property. He motioned to approve the landscaping plan with the provision that, if the

Vito's plan does not call for new store-frontage along the walkway, more landscaping be added in the southwest corner. Mr. Reppert seconded the motion. And the Commission passed the resolution unanimously.

**Resolution #22-2005**

**Review of the final land development plan for the proposed Second and Washington Streets Parking Structure, at North Second and Washington Streets.**

Mr. Bensinger introduced himself and Mr. Kramer. He indicated that he received the June 15<sup>th</sup> review letter from Andrew Miller and revised the plan, accordingly. He pointed out the crosswalk added, pursuant to Mr. Bealer's comments at the preliminary review. He said Thorn Street is to be widened and kept as a two-way street. Landscaping proposed amounts to 31 trees and 25 bushes.

Mr. Boscov alerted the Commission to the Parking Authority's consideration of added retail on the first floor of the garage. They will be considering it at their Board meeting the following night. Andrew Miller said that if such a decision is made, further relief from the Zoning Hearing board will be required, as well as a revision plan submission.

Mr. Kramer said the footprint would remain the same. But a slight reduction in landscaping and increase in impervious cover would result from a pedestrian "plaza" at the storefronts. He said the parking lost from the added retail (88 spaces) might result in a decision to build another layer, thereby increasing the height, also.

Mr. Palka motioned to approve the final plan, with the provision that they return with revised plans if a decision is made to add retail space. Mr. Bealer seconded. And the Commission passed the resolution unanimously.

**Resolution #23-2005**

**Review of the preliminary land development plan for the Reading School District Athletic Facilities, at North Thirteenth Street and Hampden Boulevard.**

Mr. Massie introduced himself and said that Barry Suski, from the School District, was unable to make it for the presentation. He gave an overview of the proposed fields, track resurfacing, driveway rehabilitation and significant stormwater management improvements. He mentioned receiving the June 15<sup>th</sup> review letter from Andrew Miller. The mostly, technical issues cited will be addressed.

Andrew Miller asked about the possibility of consolidating the purparts of Tract 1. Mr. Massie indicated the uncertainty regarding those pieces and said the School Board declined to correct it. Mr. Bealer said that he would be attending the next day's School Board meeting, and would bring it up then, along with some other things outside the "Planning Commission purview". Mr. Raffaelli said the School District has operated the site continuously for 35 years. He felt that, since it would probably continue in the same for the foreseeable future, the deed confusion wasn't an imminent issue.

Mr. Raffaelli did raise concern over stormwater run-off and earth disturbance. Mr. Massie detailed the drainage improvements. He said earth movement would be necessary for the regrading and utility installation. It will be stockpiled, but put back and stabilized on-site. He mentioned an ambitious construction schedule.

Mr. Massie also indicated that DEP sewage planning documentation will be submitted. Andrew Miller said that a lighting plan should be submitted with the final plan.

Mr. Lauter motioned to approve the preliminary plan, with the provision that lighting and sewage issues be satisfactorily addressed on the final plan. Mr. Bealer seconded the motion adding that Public Works approve the stormwater management plan. The Commission passed the resolution unanimously.

**Resolution #24-2005**

**Review the sketch land conveyance plan for the Schuylkill River Greenway Association, for parcels along the Thun Trail.**

Mr. Bollinger commended the Commission for its conduct of the meeting. He referred to his sketch plan and identified the three adjacent land owners to receive land through this transaction, Russell Plywood, Victor Emanuel II, and Brentwood Industries. The intent is to convey the land they have been holding for the construction of the trail, keeping easements for the continued use and maintenance, thereafter. The necessary utility easements will also be established. He asked the Commission and the planning staff to offer guidance on the applicable requirements of the ordinance.

Mr. Bowen explained that the SRGA doesn't need the responsibility of all the property to maintain a 10-foot-wide trail. He said that Russell Plywood has plans to expand, and other "economic development" opportunities could result from the transfers. He mentioned the lease arrangement with PennDOT, where the trail crosses through the US 422 right-of-way.

Andrew Miller cited ownership and maintenance as the most pressing concerns. He wondered if the parcels shown match the original railroad right-of-way. Mr. Bollinger promised geometric boundaries of the parcels and easements for the next review. Mr. Powell reminded of the paving encroachments on their property.

Mr. Bowen explained that construction of the bridge over Lancaster Avenue, and the trail toward the Brentwood property, represents the last link in a continuous 30-mile section between Blue Marsh and the Pottstown area.

Mr. Lauter asked if any additional restrictions are being added to these lands conveyed, as they relate to the trail easements. Mr. Powell said that the easement is 25-foot wide in some places. And PennDOT's authority in the area helps restrict development, too.

Mr. Raffaelli mentioned the utility and sign company trucks using the trail to reach their assets with work trucks. They have damaged the trail in the past, but insisted that they had a right of access, whenever confronted. Mr. Powell confirmed that some do indeed have those rights (Land Displays), but are obligated to fix any damage caused to the trail.

Mr. Miller recommended that the Commission accept the sketch plan and allow SRGA to proceed to a final plan submission, with boundary data provided, and other areas of concern duly addressed. Since the plan doesn't propose development, not everything in the subdivision ordinance applies. Mr. Bollinger suggested a meeting with the planning staff to resolve those needs. Mr. Bealer asked that a typical cross-section of the trail construction be added to the plan, as well.

Mr. Bowen confirmed that Pennsylvania is still the leader in the number of rail trails.

Mr. Bealer made a motion to accept the sketch plan and allow SRGA to proceed straight to the final plan submission, with all easements and major adjacent land owners identified. Mr. Lauter seconded. And the Commission passed the resolution unanimously. **Resolution #25-2005**

#### **Other business**

872 North Eighth Street, comment on the application for conversion of a storage area above a business (Reading Coffee Roasters) into an apartment, in the R-O district.

Dr. Pressley introduced herself and explained to the Commission that City Council is asking for the Commission's comment on all applications for Conditional Uses. She explained the previous history of the space as a residential use and confirmed that the necessary utilities/amenities are still in place. While the use is technically classified as a conversion, the applicant is seeking legal recognition of an existing condition. She recommended that the Commission refer the matter to Council and confirmed that the normal code inspection process would still apply.

Andrew Miller recommended that the Commission recognize the apartment. He felt it was unclear exactly what Council was asking for, other than a recommendation. The State planning code gives governing bodies the final say on "conditional uses". He reminded the Commission that if and when a business does seek to open in the now vacant space, they would again need zoning approval. He felt that a variance would be required for the multiple uses, at least. He discussed with the Commission the preferred procedure for correspondence between the Commission and the Council. It was finally decided that a memo would be drafted, summarizing the Commission's discussion and concerns.

Mr. Lauter recommended that Council approve the conversion, if they feel it would not adversely affect the parking situation in the neighborhood. Mr. Reppert seconded his motion. And the Commission agreed to the recommendation 5-0 (Mr. Palka had left by this time).

700 Lancaster Avenue, comment on the application to provide massage therapy/body wrapping services in the All Stars Hair Studio and Day Spa, in the C-H district.

Dr. Pressley reminded that all massage therapy services are considered as Conditional Uses. She demonstrated the lease agreement and several exhibits explaining the services to be provided, in Spanish, but with photographs. She mentioned that the Codes and Public Health departments would have an opportunity to inspect the premises. Mr. Bealer felt that since it was already a commercial establishment, it would not be detrimental if subject to proper monitoring.

Mr. Lauter asked if the matter would still be given a public hearing. Andrew Miller briefly explained the difference between "adult businesses" and "massage therapy", and the different ordinances regulating them. Mr. Lauter then wondered if the Commission could declare that it had no position. Dr. Pressley saw that as a reasonable possibility. Andrew Miller recommended that the Commission make some comment on it, adding that Council is

free to place its own “reasonable conditions and safeguards”, as it sees fit. He felt that some consideration also be given to the hours of operation, noting that he has witnessed the salon operating in the later hours.

The Commission was obviously struggling with merits of such spa services, but agreed that is frequently becoming an added offering in salons.

Mr. Bealer recommended that Council require the body wrapping services be separated from the other salon services, especially where children may be present, that the hours of operation be clarified, and that the establishment be monitored by the health department. Mr. Cohen seconded the motion. And the Commission agreed to the recommendation 5-0.

Mr. Lauter motioned to approve the May 10 minutes. Mr. Reppert seconded, and the Commission approved the May minutes, unanimously.

Mr. Raffaelli asked for a motion to adjourn the meeting. Mr. Cohen made the motion, Mr. Lauter seconded, and the Commission voted unanimously to adjourn the June meeting. – 10:45 pm.

AWM / awm

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