

Minutes
Regular meeting of the City of Reading Planning Commission
November 13, 2008 at 7:00 pm

Members present:

Ermete J. Raffaelli, Chairman
David N. Reppert, Vice Chairman
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:

Jeffery C. Euclide, Entech Engineering, Inc.
Christopher J. Fell, United Corrstack, LLC

Chairman Raffaelli called the November 13th meeting to order, noted the withdrawal of the Islamic Center's plan, and asked for acceptance of the relatively short agenda. Mr. Palka moved to accept the November agenda. Mr. Rothermel seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to accept the November 13th agenda.

Subdivision and Land Development:

Review the **final** land development plan for the **CedarPak #4 Paper Mill (United Corrstack, LLC)**, a new paper mill proposed for the former Reading Tube Corporation building on that parcel known as 800 South Street [0:00.57]

Mr. Fell recalled the preliminary approval granted at the October meeting, and the feedback received from the Planning Office with regard to the final plan. He noted Entech's written response, since distributed to the Commission members. He said they had no objections to any of the revisions requested. He delivered the updated legal description, describing the annexation of the railroad land to the development tract. He deferred to the civil engineer for any remaining site-related questions.

Mr. Bealer moved to approve the final plan, subject to the corrections identified in the Planning Office review, any recommendations by the Department of Public Works, and any other appropriate approvals and permits. Mr. Rothermel seconded. And the Commission voted 4 to 1 to approve the "CedarPak #4 Paper Mill" final plan, Mr. Raffaelli casting the dissent.

Resolution #71-2008

Other business:

update-Blighted Property Review Committee (the Buttonwood Gateway Focus Area) [0:08.14]

Mr. Bealer said the Review Committee had been meeting for 13 months, and was ready to propose its first plan. He said the Planning Commission, by ordinance, must determine the appropriate reuse of the target areas, and communicate that to the Review Committee and Redevelopment Authority. Turning to the distributed maps and narrative, he explained the Review Committee's focus area for 2009; an area roughly bounded by Buttonwood, North 2nd and Walnut Streets, and Schuylkill Avenue. He explained the color-coding, and the priority properties for taking, developed with tax delinquency and code violation information in addition to Great Valley Consultants' conditions survey. He described a two-phase redevelopment plan, and the participation of the Redevelopment Authority, pending annexations to neighboring properties of off-street parking development. He said the first phase involves the demolition of some McKnight Street homes and their annexations to the adjacent properties fronting Schuylkill Avenue, and others (including houses facing Jefferson and West Elm) targeted for community parking areas. He hoped to eliminate non-conforming lots, and relieve the parking limitations in alley-like streets. He characterized the second phase as more ambitious; the demolition of the properties on south side of Buttonwood for a new Commercial-Neighborhood zoning district. He alluded to the five-minute walking radius principal recommended in Sasaki's RiverPlace Master Plan. He asked that the Commission members review the materials, and be prepared to discuss it at a future meeting. He said the next steps were presentations to the Redevelopment Authority and the new Community Development Director.

Mr. Miller anticipated conflicts with the Zoning Ordinance's design guidelines on driveways and parking lots, specifically the curb cut widths and setback requirements. Mr. Bealer said that would have to be considered before offering the cleared parcels to neighbors. Mr. Rothermel cautioned against the development of off-street parking pads, where the curb cuts and turning provisions would eliminate enough on-street parking to cause a net loss in the total. He suggested site-specific considerations. He wondered about collaboration with the Planning Office. Mr. Bealer said they were nearing that point, the Committee still working on their funding streams. Mr. Miller mentioned his own attendance at several Committee meetings.

Mr. Rothermel asked if any existing structures were to remain in the proposed Commercial-Neighborhood district. Mr. Bealer indicated Danny's Auto Repair, the Holy Trinity Church of God, and the House of Good Food restaurant. Mr. Rothermel wondered if the lots were of a practical size for redevelopment, and the evaluation of need for additional retail space. Mr. Bealer envisioned low-impact, locally-oriented services, pointing to recent commercial occupancies around the intersections of North 6th and Greenwich and North 9th and Oley Streets. He said they'd be looking for the Redevelopment Authority's initiative.

Asked if the Fels Institute consultants had provided any input, Mr. Bealer said they had only seen the first phase, and agreed with it. Mr. Rothermel agreed with the efforts to increase parking, but recalled a previous neighborhood improvement experience in the 400 block of Schuylkill Avenue, where a lack of ownership/management planning led to the closure of another off-street community parking area. Mr. Bealer hoped to form community development corporations. Mr. Rothermel responded that Neighborhood Housing Services of Reading was, at the time, only a half block away from the project, and involved in the sales of the rehabilitated homes.

Mr. Miller wondered if the Review Committee was proposing a starting point, or intended to complete the identified work before looking at other areas. Mr. Bealer called it a focus for 2009, in addition to the 600 block of North Front Street and a few properties on Penn Street. He said their role was limited to the takings and conveyance to the Redevelopment Authority. He said plans for reuse are subject to the Planning Commission's consideration. He expected the Review Committee to be financed and acting on January 1, expecting about \$200,000 from the City's Community Development Block Grant allocation.

Regarding the apparent conditions and lack of blight identified on the properties fronting Buttonwood Street, Mr. Rothermel wondered why they were identified for taking. Mr. Bealer answered the preference for new commercial property development. Mr. Rothermel again noted the lack of any market analyses demonstrating a demand.

Mr. Raffaelli suggested extending the southern border of the focus area to include Washington Street. Mr. Bealer said it was considered, but that the Redevelopment Authority's Director still prefers a designated redevelopment area for expediency, reminding that the Review Committee only targets vacant properties.

Mr. Rothermel asked if they had considered the properties on the north side of Buttonwood Street, west of Schuylkill Avenue, otherwise known as the "Gateway Area". Mr. Bealer noted the initiatives of the County Redevelopment Authority's "Acquisition, Demolition, Disposition Program (ADD)". Mr. Rothermel noted that those *acquisitions* were limited to voluntary sales. Mr. Bealer thought they might focus there in 2010, thinking the proposed area would also compliment the County's effort, as well as the Goggleworks' affordable housing initiative, the planned development of the Goggleworks Apartments, and improvements at Lauer's Park Elementary School. Mr. Rothermel objected to the targeting of houses that aren't blighted. Mr. Bealer expected the Commercial-Neighborhood zoning to augment the values of the remaining residential properties. Mr. Rothermel repeated the need to justify the added commercial space. He had no opposition to the "phase 1" plan. Mr. Bealer hoped decide early whether the pursuit of funding for those market studies was worthwhile. Mr. Miller wondered if someone had discouraged a joint effort in the Buttonwood Gateway, where he saw a better chance of assembling larger redevelopment sites. Mr. Bealer sensed an unwritten plan, for a gated community, already identified for that area. He said the Review Committee's monetary resources will limit them to 10-20 homes per year. Mr. Miller suggested that funding would be more limited if used to acquire sound properties with higher appraised values. Mr. Bealer said the advice to the Review Committee was to pursue the easiest and obvious properties first. He recalled the Allentown and Harrisburg experiences of property owners eventually 'getting the picture' and getting compliant. Mr. Rothermel expressed his concern at the slow progress in the "Buttonwood Gateway" redevelopment area, especially in the residential blocks of Tulpehocken, Miltimore and Gordon Streets. He hoped available resources would be directed at finishing the implementation of that plan. Mr. Palka, recalling the preparation of the Comprehensive Plan 2000, remembered a suggestion that the City focus more attention on removing isolated instances of blight in otherwise stable neighborhoods suffering them. He recognized such a neighborhood in the northeast section of the City, and wondered why the Review Committee elected to start where it did. Mr. Bealer

concurrent, and described three simultaneous strategies for selecting target properties: focus areas, focus neighborhoods, and individual properties outside of either. He thanked the Commission for its feedback, intending to communicate it to the Review Committee. Mr. Raffaelli commended the “task force” approach, suggesting more ad hoc groups be convened to focus on specific City problems.

review the draft October 14, 2008 meeting minutes [0:59.38]

Following some requests for clarifications and corrections, Mr. Miller offered to resubmit the October minutes for consideration at the December meeting. No action was taken.

§609.c review-zoning amendment prohibiting rentals in the R1A, R1 and R2 districts [1:06.00]

Ms. Mayfield, having researched the case law cited in the County Planning Commission’s comments, indicated her agreement that the ordinance would be a regulation of ownership as opposed to use. She said the draft appears to prohibit even single-family rentals in the affected zones, and risks legal consequences. She suggested the Commission recommend City Council’s denial. Mr. Raffaelli wondered if they should attempt a more constructive recommendation. Ms. Mayfield couldn’t imagine what revisions would satisfy the legal concern.

Mr. Bealer moved to recommend City Council’s denial of the bill, citing the potential legal ramifications, and the Law Department’s position against enacting it as a zoning ordinance. Mr. Rothermel seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to recommend denial of the rental prohibition amendment.

Resolution #72-2008

Mr. Miller, noting the requirement to cite Comprehensive Plan policies in support of their recommendations, recognized Council’s aim in protecting neighborhoods. He agreed that the legal concerns were an overriding factor. Mr. Rothermel thought that, even if proved legal, it went too far by including the R2 districts.

§609.c review-zoning amendment defining and regulating “life care retirement facility”, “nursing home” and “residential care facility” in the R2, R3 and CR districts [1:13.42]

Ms. Mayfield called the proposed ordinance similar to the version previously distributed and briefly reviewed at the September 9th meeting. She summarized the bill’s requirements on licensing facilities and their classifications. Mr. Raffaelli asked about the outcome of the October 8th public hearing. Mr. Miller said he hadn’t attended, understanding the amendment to be undergoing a revision. He said he had nothing to add, and supported any efforts to clarify the language of the Zoning Ordinance.

Mr. Palka moved to recommend that City Council adopt the ordinance. Mr. Bealer seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to support the retirement facility zoning amendment.

Resolution #73-2008

§603.c.2 review-conditional use of 164 West Oley Street (conversion) [1:18.58]

Ms. Mayfield briefly reminded the Commission of the conditional use procedure. Mr. Miller noted that it had been awhile since their last conditional use review. Mr. Rothermel noted the 17-foot width of the parcel, and wondered where the parking would be sited. Mr. Miller answered off-site. Mr. Bealer noted the restricted access to the rear of the property and the three-block distance to the leased parking arrangement (at 622 North 3rd Street). Mr. Rothermel felt that too far away to be practical. Mr. Miller said the Zoning Ordinance requires 1½ off-street spaces per unit, and so would necessitate variances from the standard quantity, as well as its placement. Mr. Bealer observed a limited parking situation in that neighborhood, already. He felt the approximately 1600-square foot house better served as a practical single-family dwelling.

Mr. Rothermel moved to recommend that City Council deny the proposed conversion of 164 West Oley Street to two-units, citing the limited and remote off-street parking available, the living area, and the Comprehensive Plan policy on residential density. Mr. Reppert seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously in opposition to the conversion of 164 West Oley Street.

Resolution #74-2008

Mr. Raffaelli asked for an update on the Law Department’s efforts toward a traffic-impact fee ordinance. Ms. Mayfield mentioned having researched the issue, and offered to seek City Council’s preference about initiating that process, either as part of the rewritten Subdivision and Land Development Ordinance or later. Mr. Raffaelli asked that an update be provided at the December meeting.

Ms. Mayfield reported the “land-use ordinance amendment committee” to be assembled, and first meeting the following week. She believed a realtor and a municipal attorney had also been seated on the committee.

Mr. Miller reported that the Mayor and Our City Reading, Inc. were seeking a joint meeting with the Commission and the Zoning Hearing Board, regarding the proposed DoubleTree Hotel. Mr. Raffaelli suspected they were seeking a shortcut through the planning process. Mr. Miller heard that they wanted to begin installing foundations within two weeks. Mr. Rothermel expressed his surprise that they could move that quickly on the foundation without having prepared a land development plan. Mr. Miller said he attended one design meeting (September 17th), but hadn’t been included in any since. He understood the geotechnical investigation to have taken longer than first anticipated, and that the developer had recently changed design firms. He suggested that, if the project takes the route that’s shaping, the Commission turn to City Council, as its sponsoring body. He called it a major project. Mr. Rothermel agreed, believing it deserved “reasonable scrutiny”. He suggested that something probably could have been presented months ago. The members’ consensus was for an evening meeting on November 19th.

Mr. Palka moved to adjourn the November meeting. Mr. Reppert seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to adjourn the November 13th meeting. – 8:49 pm.