Minutes
Regular meeting of the City of Reading Planning Commission
October 9, 2007 at 7:00 pm

Members present:

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

Staff present:

Andrew W. Miller, Planning Office
Michelle R. Mayfield, Department of Law
Charles M. Jones, Department of Public Works

Others present:

Robert M. Behling, RiverPlace Development Corporation
William J. Vitale, Designworks Architects, PC
Sarah R. Leeper, Simone Collins Landscape Architecture
Lindsay Wagerer, McIlvried, DiDiano & Mox, LLC
John R. Hill, Muhlenberg Greene Architects, Ltd.
Howard Quaintance, Muhlenberg Greene Architects, Ltd.
Kevin M. Mohn, Systems Design Engineering, Inc.
Larry R. Orkus, Reading Eagle Company
J. Michael Engle, Reading Eagle Company
Stephen F. DeLucas, Reading Eagle Company

Chairman Raffaelli called the October 9th meeting to order, reminded presenters to sign in, and asked for acceptance of the agenda. Mr. Miller noted his typographical error in reversing the sponsoring entities between the third and fourth agenda items. Mr. Lauter moved to accept the agenda. Mr. Palka seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to approve the October 9th agenda.

Subdivision and Land Development:

Review the **signage program** plan for the **Port of Reading Heritage Trail**, interpretive and directional signage proposed at various points along the Schuylkill Riverfront. [0:01.19]

Mr. Behling, presenting a poster board showing sample renderings of the proposed signage, mentioned the grant awarded from Pennsylvania's Department of Transportation "Transportation Enhancement Program". He described interpretive signage to be installed at 25 different locations, including 9 kiosk-type signs at different trailheads. He said the placements were chosen to attract people from existing public parking facilities serving the trail. He mentioned several tableau-type signs throughout, telling the story of the Schuylkill Navigation Company. He said RiverPlace worked with the Department of Public Works in selecting the locations, and showed those locations to the Planning Office.

Mr. Raffaelli asked if they'd be replacing the sign at the Craig Link Bridge. Mr. Behling said not, referring to it as Schuylkill River Greenway Association property.

Mr. Miller asked how easily the signage could be changed/updated. Mr. Behling said the design allows the panels to be replaced. He mentioned some research assistance from a National Park Service historian working "freelance", and recognized other contributions from George M. Meiser, IX (Historical Society of Berks County), Glenn Wenrich (Pennsylvania Canal Society), and the Hiester Canal Center. He said the signage will celebrate the region's canal history. Mr. Miller asked if the Reading Company Technical & Historical Society had participated. Mr. Behling said one sign will discuss the Railroad, as it affected the canals.

Mr. Miller asked if the Greenway Association had plans for additional signs. Mr. Behling answered yes, having directed them to the Planning Commission. He assumed they'd handle the distance markers, and didn't anticipate any location conflicts.

Mr. Rothermel wondered about visual coordination of signage throughout the Greenway. Mr. Behling described their similarity to Park Service designs, noting the guidelines established by the Greenway Association for size, font, materials and colors.

Mr. Miller asked if there was a budget for maintenance and updates. Mr. Behling said installation only, as a gift to the City, using as durable and vandal-resistant materials as possible. Mr. Jones mentioned some other discussions regarding provisions for maintenance. Mr. Rothermel asked about Berks County possibly assuming ownership and responsibility. Mr. Behling mentioned their draft *Greenway, Park and Recreation Plan*, making similar recommendations, and recently submitted for the Board of Commissioners' review.

Mr. Lauter moved a resolution supporting the signage proposal, as it furthers the Comprehensive Plan's policies of educating and informing the public of the importance and history of the area. Mr. Palka seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to support the Port of Reading Heritage Trail signage program.

Resolution #64-2007

Review the **design study** for **Confluence Point Park**, recreational improvements and security measures planned for Confluence Point Park/Reading Greenway. [0:18.34]

Mr. Behling said money had been provided from RiverPlace's "catalyst fund" for the schematic design. He said the result is the product of public outreach in the Glenside neighborhood, from the business and citizen communities, fishing, canoeing and biking interests. He said Sasaki Associates, Inc., in their master plan for RiverPlace, had identified the area as one of few where the highways weren't directly along river. He said future development proposals should take advantage. He said the design study proposes the enhancement of an existing open space, aiming to make it more inviting and usable, and stimulating future private investments. He noted the "alignment study" underway for the Schuylkill River Trail, now looking to extend northward toward Hamburg. He felt Confluence Point would play an important role. He said the Park, and its ownership/maintenance, is also discussed in the County's draft "Greenway" Plan. He suggested the Commission communicate its preferences on that particular issue directly to the City Council and administration. He said they had completed the Park analysis phase, and identified its challenges, including: floodway, slope, vegetation, and access.

Mr. Vitale introduced Simone Collins Landscape Architecture, now participating in the design effort. He cited their experience in park planning. Presenting a slide show, he described the general Park area and points of interest. He indicated the position of the Eastern Rigging and Industrial Contracting property, and their near- and longer-term trail connection plans; the Schuylkill Avenue Bridge for now, but eventually a dedicated bridge crossing from Dana Memorial Park. He mentioned alignment and improvement of the trail, boat landing/launch provisions, improved views across river, and enhancements to the Blair Avenue entrance. He proposed a "Circle of Cedars" in recognition of the area's Lenni-Lenape heritage. Other improvements discussed included, a gazebo, stabilization of point itself, a small amphitheater, restoration of some old foundations, and a designated fishing spot. He recognized that anglers would continue using the outside wall of the Bushong Mill race, unless physically blocked, albeit a dangerous crossing via the metalwork at the top of the race. He recommended removing the worst of the Mill's walls, restoration for the rest, and gaining new plaza area in the process. He said the turbines could be removed and displayed in that plaza. He mentioned safety and security considerations, and the possibility of additional lighting.

Mr. Rothermel asked about plans for parking. Mr. Vitale said it was limited to that planned along Blair Avenue. Mr. Behling mentioned the County's rehabilitation plans for the Stonecliffe Recreation Area, including its comfort station and a trail interruption in the parking lot. He said they were aiming to relate the Confluence Point design to it, complimenting it, rather than competing with duplicate features. Mr. Rothermel recognized the extensive and more accessible picnic area already at Stonecliffe, serving a neighborhood not heavily residential in character. Mr. Behling saw opportunities for additional residential development. He thought Confluence Point provided a smaller, and more intimate recreation opportunity. Mr. Vitale suggested planning for regular police patrols with a controlled-gate access from Blair Avenue.

Mr. Rothermel recalled the previous $750,000 investment in the area, financed in large part by the State for property acquisitions and securing trail easements. He suggested the project team research possible terms and conditions associated. Mr. Behling offered to check with the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources.

Mr. Rothermel mentioned a former underground oil tank having complicated the original location of the trail. He said the Reading Box Company, and the proximity of other buildings to the top of the slope, had hindered a trail location adjacent to the River, and the City opted for the easier path along Blair Avenue. Mr. Behling referred to the RiverPlace Master Plan's directive to look for residential in-fill opportunities as commercial/industrial users "move on". He thought it an opportunity for a zoning overlay district, and hoped for capital improvement funding. Mr. Rothermel noted a difficulty in applying zoning to the Glenside area, with its unique mix of industry and housing. He preferred to focus on strategies for moving the trail through, and past the Carpenter Technology Corporation, and let that route dictate the shape of connections. Mr. Behling mentioned an on-going Trail alignment study, and a meeting between Robert P. Thomas (an architect on the study team) and Carpenter management, who

had indicated their openness to locating the trail along their "west shore" property. He envisioned a bridge aside of, or attached to the Warren Street By-pass/PA12 bridge carrying the Trail east again, toward the Muhlenberg Township trails.

Mr. Miller asked about engaging the Department of Environmental Protection (Bureau of Watershed Management) regarding permits for the encroachments suggested. Mr. Behling said the dam itself was beyond the scope of the study, other than improving the portage route and its landings.

Mr. Lauter wondered about potential automobile/bike/pedestrian conflicts if the trail became an accessible boat ramp. Mr. Behling said it should be closed to vehicles, if for no other reason than preventing illegal dumping. He hoped it could be patrolled by police vehicles. Mr. Vitale suggested other possible changes, if ever the County adopted the trail. He said they weren't looking for the Commission's endorsement, as yet. Mr. Behling said they would return with additional details.

Review the draft **master plan** for **City Park**, a guiding document for the future use and development of City Park/Penn's Common. [1:10.34]

Ms. Leeper said the City retained Simone Collins Landscape Architecture at beginning of summer, who held a "kick-off meeting" with City staff on June 4th, meetings in late June and July with the Penn's Common Neighbors, and again with City staff in September. She anticipated a final draft in late October, to be presented for adoption. She noted the Park's inclusion in the Penn's Common Historic District, and recommended any changes proposed be reviewed by the Historic Architecture Review Board. She recalled the Park's former uses as a water source, a mustering ground, and a County prison. She said they divided the Park into zones for their analytical purposes. She noted plenty of access points, suggesting the City consider closing the Perkiomen Avenue access for pedestrian safety. She noted the abundant mature trees, recommending a regular maintenance program. She noted the history in the Park's memorials, but suggested the Park had reached its memorial capacity, and recommended a more formal review process for additional installations. She said the vehicular traffic needs "calming" for pedestrian safety, and to promote the pedestrian priority. She noted a lack of maintenance at the (Volunteer Fireman's Memorial) Bandshell's pond, but recognized the (F. X. Browne, Inc.) rehabilitation study already underway. She suggested fountains as interactive water features, and a re-creation of the former rose garden with a lower-maintenance strategy. She recommended a redesigned Bandshell, with performance utility in-mind. She said the former police building could be reused, perhaps in a commercial venture.

Ms. Leeper suggested a one-way vehicular circulation, possibly on a trial basis. Mr. Vitale confirmed that the City's Traffic Planner had studied the traffic patterns personally, and was generally supportive of the one-way concept. Mr. Rothermel asked if the study accounted for the changes coming with the Reading School District's conversion of the former St. Joseph Medical Center campus. Ms. Leeper said it did.

Ms. Leeper advised a "garden setting" for the "Dove" artwork, as opposed to its current, exposed display. She alluded to feedback from musicians that feel the Bandshell's pond hinders their interaction with an audience. She suggested the audience likewise can't interact with the water, proposing a reconstruction with a vegetative buffer, a smaller "stream" fronting the Bandshell, and an amphitheatre-like seating arrangement, possibly with ticketing options, per the Berks Arts Council suggestion. She suggested shrubbery plantings to formalize and separate the war memorials.

Ms. Leeper suggested rehabilitation of the former police station and its parking, currently perceived by the public as a restricted area, and coordinating the same for the organized basketball events. She said stormwater management and electrical improvements were needed Park-wide. She suggested an interpretive signage program detailing the Park's history, restroom facilities at the Bandshell, and additional lighting and trash receptacles throughout.

Mr. Palka took the apparent condition of the Park's roads, despite infrequent resurfacing, as evidence of lower traffic use, especially by trucks. Mr. Vitale estimated a much higher volume.

Mr. Rothermel wondered where the original bandshell was located. Ms. Leeper said it was hard to tell from the photographs, and that it predated the prison. Mr. Rothermel strongly supported relocating the Reading Police Memorial. Ms. Leeper alluded to other similar sentiments, but heard resistance from the Police Department who preferred the current location for its high visibility and easy monitoring.

Mr. Miller asked about the identification of the Historic Architecture Review Board as the body to review proposals for a public park. Mr. Vitale suggested the Planning Commission. Ms. Leeper also assumed the Commission's involvement, not necessarily identifying the Review Board as the primary entity, but recommending a more formal process than is currently practiced. Mr. Rothermel recalled the past practice of considering the Commission and Planning Office in proposals for City recreational facilities.

Mr. Raffaelli asked if they'd had been able to identify those memorials placed without approval. Ms. Leeper called their inventory "informal", being limited to the major installations. Recalling other similar master planning contracts, she recognized a touchy subject. She said that was something for the City to address internally.

Mr. Rothermel expressed his nostalgia for the Bandshell pond. While uncertain of its actual origin, and understanding the concerns of performers, he thought it deserved some historical consideration. Ms. Leeper felt improvements were necessary, at least, to showcase a feature that she felt performed more as a "moat". Mr. Rothermel asked how a rehabilitation would affect the Berks County Conservancy's wetland demonstration down-slope. Ms. Leeper said the exhibit was constructed to mitigate the leakage from damage in the pond's liner. She suggested it had overgrown, with water flowing over it, rather than settling within it. Mr. Vitale said the F. X. Browne plan addresses it.

Mr. Bealer asked about any recommendations for the traffic signals at the five-way Constitution Boulevard/Hill Road/Clymer Street intersection. Ms. Leeper called it "outside" their project scope, but admitted her own confusion as an "out-of-towner" negotiating it.

Mr. Lauter cautioned against ambitious landscaping programs for the war memorials, without a dedicated maintenance plan. He suggested a neighborhood "adoption", similar to strategies at work in Centre Park. Some additional discussion followed on pond design and safety measures.

Review the **final** land development plan for **AutoZone Store No. 4603**, a subdivision and automotive parts retail store proposed for that parcel known as 600 Greenwich Street. [1:58.40]

Ms. Wagerer recalled the September presentation, tabled over the Commission's objections to the new driveway. She said the issue had been discussed with AutoZone, who, having agreed to eliminate the planned driveway, have since established a cross-access easement with their neighbors, Reading Plaza, LLC, for the shared use of the existing driveway. She asked if the Commission had any other concerns.

Mr. Miller said he asked for some additional notes, but was otherwise satisfied with the current plan. He asked about the status of the erosion and sedimentation control plan. Ms. Wagerer anticipated the Conservation District's approval later in the week, or early the next. She confirmed that AutoZone intends to break ground yet this year. Mr. Miller recommended plan approval and endorsement, intending to withhold the record sets pending a signed municipal improvements agreement.

Mr. Bealer moved to approve the final land development plan, pending Conservation District approval, sewage planning approval, the executed improvements agreement, and any remaining corrections required by the Planning Office. Mr. Rothermel seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to approve the AutoZone Store No. 4603 final plan.

Resolution #65-2007

Review the **final** land development plan for the **Reading Eagle Company – Addition for New Press and Operations**, a proposed addition to the newspaper production facility on those parcels known as 317-339 Penn Street. [2:03.48]

Mr. Hill believed they had satisfactorily addressed all the Planning Office comments, still waiting on the Conservation District's approval of the erosion and sedimentation control plan. He said there were no major changes made, since the previous presentation. He briefly described the addition to house the new printing press, the new mailroom facilities, the shipping/receiving docks on Court Street, the roll paper receiving and storage on the basement level, and the driveway for its delivery. He noted the variance granted from the allowed lot coverage, and explained the improved turning movements designed for the delivery trucks.

Mr. Rothermel asked if any pedestrian connections existed between Washington and Court Streets, more specifically between the Chiarelli Plaza parking garage and the Washington Tower Apartments. Mr. Hill said they propose a painted crosswalk across Court Street, with signage. He said the Reading Eagle leases parking spaces in that garage. Asked if the redesign would keep trucks from protruding into Court Street, and blocking sidewalks, Mr. Hill said the new receiving dock will keep the sidewalk clear. He said new sidewalks would be installed along the Penn Street frontage. Mr. Lauter asked about pedestrian access between Court and Penn Streets. Mr. Hill mentioned the sidewalk on the east elevation of the Neversink Fire Company and the loading area east of the Rent-A-Center. Mr. Rothermel reminded that it is private property, as opposed to the public sidewalk aside the former Parking Authority lot.

Asked about the appearance of the western elevation, Mr. Hill noted the same 'precast' panels as proposed for the front, with some articulation, but actually designed as a future party wall. Mr. Quaintance agreed a pedestrian throughway would be preferable, but felt the needs of the Reading Eagle's operation required building

over the entire site. Mr. Hill confirmed that any trees damaged during construction would be replaced. Mr. Miller indicated his satisfaction with related notes on the plan.

Mr. Rothermel appreciated their efforts on the façade design, its massing and fenestration, anticipating a "landmark" structure. Mr. Miller asked if the press hall would be lit throughout the night. Mr. Hill mentioned a night-specific light design, with accents on the press.

Ms. Mayfield said she received the draft municipal improvements agreement, with approved numbers. She said it was just a matter of formalizing the document. Mr. Miller mentioned some other regulatory approvals pending.

Mr. Rothermel moved to approve the final plan, subject to approval of the erosion and sedimentation control plan and the municipal improvements agreement. Mr. Lauter seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to approve the Reading Eagle Company's Addition plan.

Resolution #66-2007

Other business:

minutes-September 11, 2007 Planning Commission meeting [2:32.41]

Mr. Bealer noted two typographical errors found. He moved to approve the September minutes with requested corrections. Mr. Palka seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to approve the September 11, 2007 meeting minutes.

Resolution #67-2007

sign exchange proposal-Land Displays (Penn Street Bridge and Morgantown Road) [2:34.38]

Mr. Miller regretted not having the materials provided by Land Displays. He said they've offered the City an electronic billboard on the Penn Street Bridge, in exchange for a new electronic billboard on Morgantown Road. He said the Bridge sign could aid in directing downtown traffic, especially during events. Mr. Jones recalled the previous green metal sign giving directions to points-of-interest. He said it will be replaced with a digital message board. He said it is not a billboard, nor sized like one. Ms. Mayfield said it is a traffic signal. Mr. Jones said the design is consistent with the Department of Transportation's signage manual. Mr. Miller said the City's Zoning Ordinance gives the Planning Commission purview over monument, free-standing and billboard signage. Mr. Jones and Ms. Mayfield insisted that it is a traffic device. Mr. Rothermel said he'd like to see how it will affect the entrance to, and views of the City, its size and relationship to the streetscape. He felt the digital signs to be a distraction, especially when animated. Mr. Miller reminded that the "trade" would also result in another electronic billboard on Morgantown Road. Ms. Mayfield said it is allowed by the Zoning Ordinance. Mr. Raffaelli asked about rent revenues. Mr. Jones said the Bridge sign is the compensation, a value already calculated. Mr. Lauter asked if the former sign was a Department of Transportation sign. Mr. Jones said it belonged to the City. Mr. Miller disputed the classification as a traffic device. Mr. Raffaelli suggested more information be provided. Mr. Jones said it had already been approved by City Council. Mr. Raffaelli repeated his request for more detail. Mr. Miller offered to send it.

§303 notification-Legal Status of Comprehensive Plan 2000 [2:45.20]

Mr. Bealer felt the latest draft to be an accurate representation of the issues previously discussed. Mr. Rothermel asked if the legal counsel concurred. Ms. Mayfield said not, believing the interpretation too far-reaching. Mr. Miller said the legal counsel had disputed nearly every example given. Mr. Bealer felt the language of the Municipalities Planning Code to be clear in its intent. Ms. Mayfield said other factors affected its exercise, like federal court orders. Mr. Raffaelli felt the point to be the routine circumvention of the Planning Commission's review. Mr. Miller complained of the resistance, and the lack of any progress after three years of trying to further the Commission's participation. Mr. Raffaelli wondered how the Commission takes the opportunity to review proposals before demolitions, and other presumptuous actions are initiated. Mr. Miller stated that, while those examples are wrong for other reasons, his letter concerns the use of public properties specifically.

Mr. Lauter asked for an explanation of the legal counsel's disagreement. Ms. Mayfield picked the sewer treatment processes as a change outside the Commission's purview. And in the example of the Fritz Island Wastewater Treatment Plant, Mr. Jones said the work had already been ordered and approved by the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Department of Justice. Mr. Miller said expansions in sewage treatment capacity affect comprehensive planning.

Ms. Mayfield continued by disputing the purchase and sale of real estate as anything other than the

administration's purview. She said the Commission is involved only in what is being located there. Mr. Miller reminded that the law provides an opportunity for comments, recommendations and input, and not decision-making or reversing other decisions. He said the law covered it. Ms. Mayfield noted the numerous bodies identified as intended recipients of the letter. Mr. Miller noted that she had disputed each of them.

Mr. Raffaelli felt the Commission had already voiced its concerns and directed staff to communicate them. Mr. Lauter recalled having discussed certain examples, at length, and the past practice of considering the Planning Commission. He felt that newly-hired executives in public bodies should be notified of the review requirements, and felt the intent of letter to be accurate. He said, if the City expects developers to follow the process, the City should likewise be expected to abide by it. Mr. Rothermel wondered if the administration valued any advisory input. He remembered past administrations, some of which found the process useful, especially as it may have diverting criticism from elected officials. Having studied the language of the Planning Code's language personally, he recognized some duties explicitly assigned, and others open to interpretation, or to be assigned by City Council. Mr. Palka, recalling his recent re-appointment interview, felt that some Council members don't fully understand the Commission's role, but have offered their assistance. Mr. Rothermel recalled other instances when Council had threatened to take all approving authorities from the Commission.

Mr. Bealer thought the location of a new firehouse a more major example of by-passing the Commission's review. Ms. Mayfield said the capital improvements program budget review was the more appropriate opportunity to 'weigh-in'. Mr. Miller said that budget doesn't cover locations. Mr. Lauter asked if the purchase didn't show enough intent. Ms. Mayfield said the law doesn't cover "purchases".

Mr. Miller interrupted the searching for examples, noting that the Commission hardly sees any of it currently. He said some City officials simply don't want the Commission involved. Mr. Lauter wondered what the Commission could do about it, other than complaining and writing letters. Mr. Jones advised the Commission to follow the advice of its solicitor, to avoid potential legal exposures. Ms. Mayfield added that the case law hasn't invalidated any action for lack of a planning agency review.

Mr. Miller felt that if the Commission's participation is limited to reviewing plans against the verbatim of the ordinances, it ought to disband, subcontract the responsibilities, and save the time and money. Mr. Lauter felt that, if the objection is limited to the examples given, it should be discussed. He sought resolution, and suggested that Ms. Mayfield prepare her own version for comparison and further discussion. Mr. Raffaelli felt the Commission had already voted on the basic content, and felt the draft letter to have accurately represented the Commission's sentiment. Mr. Rothermel cited increased staff turn-over and the *charter form* of government as a turning point in the Commission's level of participation. He thought some viewed the Commission as an obstacle, rather than an asset. Mr. Palka regretted the absence of the television coverage for the debate over role. Mr. Rothermel stated his philosophical preference to have the Commission focus more on design concerns, such as mid-block connections in the downtown.

<u>proposed Zoning Ordinance amendment-fire stations, defined and regulated</u> [3:35.24]

Mr. Miller represented the draft language as essentially like that offered at the September meeting. He said he had further addressed the front yard setback and driveway issues. Mr. Raffaelli wondered if two, or three bays were planned for the new firehouse at 101 Lancaster Avenue. He recommended three, with one designed for longer apparatus, if ever needed in the future. Mr. Miller said the draft ordinance is intended to cover firehouse sites City-wide, and fit the structure of the current Zoning Ordinance. He asked for a motion to initiate the advertisement and adoption process.

Mr. Bealer made a motion to initiate the adoption process for the "firehouse amendment", as written. Mr. Rothermel seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to submit the proposed "firehouse amendment".[1]

Resolution #68-2007

Mr. Bealer mentioned that his father-in-law told him of some Carpenter Street residents, in the 200 block, having received letters from the Reading School District that identify their homes for demolition, in their attempts to design more off-street parking for the Southwest Middle School. He said he hadn't personally seen the letter, but wanted to alert the Commission. Ms. Mayfield recommended getting a copy of letter.

Mr. Bealer moved to adjourn the October meeting. And the meeting adjourned, without objection. – 10:45 pm.

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[1] … a "recommendation" pursuant to §§209.1.b.2 and 609.c of the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code.