

**Regular meeting of the City of Reading Planning Commission
September 13, 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
Frederic dep Rothermel

Staff present:

Andrew Miller, City Planner
Michelle Mayfield, Legal Specialist

Others present:

Gregg Bogia, Stackhouse Bensinger, Inc.
Madelyn Fudeman, Essig, Valeriano, & Fudeman, PC
John Ulrich, Reading Area Water Authority
Stephen H. Bensinger, Stackhouse Bensinger, Inc.
Doug Kramer, Synergetics Architects
Larry Lee, Reading Parking Authority
C. Wesley Seitzinger, PLS
William Vitale, Designworks Architects, PC
Anthony F. Talarico
Jeffery Waltman, City Council

Minutes:

Chairman Raffaelli called the September meeting to order, reminded the audience of the 'sign-in sheet', and called for acceptance of the agenda. Mr. Palka made a motion to approve the September agenda, and Mr. Reppert seconded. The Planning Commission approved the agenda, unanimously.

Mr. Raffaelli reported the executive session, held prior to the regular meeting, to discuss the litigation between Big Spring Inc. and the Planning Commission. Ms. Mayfield affirmed the executive session, indicating that another would likely be held, the time of which would be reported at the next regular meeting. Ms. Fudeman introduced herself and asked for assurance that the session would be held within the three day timeframe ordered by the judge.

Review the preliminary land development plan for Big Spring Inc., a water bottling plant proposed for those parcels known as 600-760 Clinton Street, the Riverfront Commerce Center.

Mr. Raffaelli introduced the project, with its revisions through August 29, whereupon Mr. Bealer made a motion to table the plan in consideration of the litigation pending over the previous submission. He added that Planning staff should be given more opportunity to review the new plan set. Mr. Lauter seconded the motion. The Commission voted unanimously to table.

Ms. Fudeman stated "for the record" that she had tried several times to contact the City Solicitor, earlier in the day, without success. She said they were under the assumption that action would be taken. She asked whether the applicant should leave the original plans for signature or arrange to have them delivered for the executive session. Ms. Mayfield advised them to leave the plans. Mr. Bogia handed plans to the Chairman.

Ms. Fudeman asked if they should be available for the executive session. Ms. Mayfield indicated that their attendance wasn't necessary.

Review the revised final land development plan for Second and Washington Streets Parking Structure, a Parking Authority garage proposed at the southeast corner of North Second and Washington Streets.

Mr. Bensinger introduced himself and reminded the Commission of the project's history and the final approval granted previously. (Those plans were never recorded.) He gave an overview of the changes made since that approval. The allotment for retail space has increased from 2200 square feet to 14,400. The entrance along

Thorn Street has been moved south toward mid-block. He said that the footprint remains “basically” the same, though some landscaping space was lost to the increased store-frontage. Other changes were made per the technical review by the Planning staff. Mr. Miller said that an updated Public Work’s review was yet to be received, though the City Engineer had verbally indicated the changes were negligible.

Mr. Bensinger said that the parking capacity was reduced to 434 by the increase in retail space (though the plans still indicate 490). He showed a landscape plan, counting 26 trees and 22 shrubs proposed. He said planters could be added around the storefronts to make up for the decreased landscaping space. The retail spaces have not yet been leased. So the exact configurations of the storefronts are not yet known. The same façade treatments and materials proposed at the previous Commission meetings are still intended.

Mr. Rothermel recalled the landscaping design efforts at the Poplar and Walnut Garage and the neglected maintenance in recent years. He hoped that the Second and Washington landscaping would be better cared for. Mr. Lee indicated that some of the Authority’s maintenance issues were being addressed, including replacement landscaping at the BARTA facility.

Mr. Raffaelli expressed his appreciation for the expanded dimensions and added interest to the building, recalling his recommendations at the April meeting. He asked for a motion.

Mr. Reppert motioned to accept the plan, contingent on a satisfactory Engineering review and their securing all applicable permits. Mr. Rothermel seconded the motion. And the Commission voted unanimously to approve.

Resolution #30-2005

Review the revised preliminary land development plan for Reading-Berks Emergency Shelter (Opportunity House), five residential units proposed at the northeast corner of North Second and Beech Streets.

Mr. Seitzinger explained the location of the project, the main Opportunity House building to the west and their residential unit to the north. When asked about building elevations, he stated that his role was limited to the preparation of the plat. He expected Mr. Vitale to bring that additional information. Realizing that the agenda was ahead of schedule, Mr. Raffaelli suggested postponing the presentation until Mr. Vitale was in attendance. All agreed and the Commission moved to the next item.

Review the preliminary land development plan for St. Nicholas Townhouses, eight units proposed at for those parcels known as 316-320 St. Nicholas Street.

Mr. Talarico assured the Commission that he was presenting alone and didn’t mind being moved ahead. He described the project as two sets of four attached units, approximately 22 feet wide by 36-38 feet in depth. He said each unit would have three bedrooms, two-and-a-half baths and full basements.

Referring to the Planning staff review, Mr. Talarico mentioned a conversation between John W. Hoffert, his Surveyor, and Mr. Miller. Mr. Miller affirmed that most of the technical issues would be resolved by the final plan submission. Mr. Talarico said that the Zoning Hearing Board granted variances (§§27-1602.b and 27-1602.i) at their April meeting allowing off-street parking in the front, as opposed to the rear, of the units. He is requesting a waiver of the sidewalk requirements of §22-602.D, since the Commission granted the same for the townhouse project across the street (St. Nicholas Street Commons, May 10, 2005).

Mr. Talarico pointed out the shade trees added pursuant to the requirements, adding that all remaining issues would be corrected for the final plan submission. He said he intends to occupy the southern end unit himself. He said building elevations would also be presented at the final plan presentation. The units will be clad with vinyl siding, with rear decks on the end units, cement patios on the middle units. The Belovitch Group will be contracted for the construction. He likened the proposal to the Belovitch-built units on Gregg Avenue. He said he requested the parking variance to keep the back yards in grass for kids to play. He said the existing home, currently his son’s residence will be razed.

Mr. Rothermel inquired about the width of the driveways, asking specifically if a variance was obtained for the double width. Mr. Miller answered “no”.

Mr. Raffaelli asked about the firewalls, recommending eight-inch masonry block. He cited the noise blocking benefit in addition to the fire protection. Mr. Talarico said that he would check. Mr. Bealer thought the 1992 BOCA requirements changed that construction standard.

Mr. Raffaelli asked if the length of the driveways allowed enough depth to accommodate sidewalks if they were to be installed in the future. Mr. Talarico said that John Hoffert indicated there would be room. Mr. Rothermel asked what material was proposed for that portion of the driveway in the public right-of-way. After some discussion, Mr. Talarico said he believed the apron would be concrete. Mr. Rothermel asked Mr. Miller to check for an applicable requirement. Mr. Raffaelli added that narrow grass strips, such as those proposed between the

driveways, don't always survive.

Mr. Miller suggested that the developer consider the same stormwater retention structures as the St. Nicholas Street Commons plan proposes. Mr. Talarico answered that he didn't have the same elevation change to work with, adding that they were working with Fred Yourkavitch to come up with something.

Mr. Reppert said he would have preferred a plan without the parking proposed in the front. He said a row of 16 cars with no buffering would present a visual impact. Mr. Miller agreed that the sight will dominate the front.

Mr. Raffaelli asked whether there were any other comments and asked for a motion. Mr. Palka motioned to approve the preliminary plan with more discussion of the Commission's concerns to follow at the final plan presentation. Mr. Lauter seconded. Mr. Miller asked if the sidewalk requirement was being formally waived. Mr. Bealer moved to amend the motion to waive the sidewalk requirement. Mr. Lauter seconded. And the Commission passed the amended motion, and the preliminary plan, unanimously.

Resolution #31-2005

Continue - Reviewing the revised preliminary land development plan for Reading-Berks Emergency Shelter (Opportunity House), five residential units proposed at the northeast corner of North Second and Beech Streets.

Mr. Vitale oriented the Commission to the location of the proposal. He said Opportunity House began as a men's shelter, and later included women and families. An expansion four or five years ago included a health clinic and job training facilities. They are seeking "five permanent housing units", 3 townhouses and two units in a duplex arrangement. The funding for the project stipulated that one of the units be "totally accessible". He said that the residences are intended for families leaving the Shelter, helping them to get back in the mainstream. There will be no time limit on their stays. He said the design encourages the kids to play in the back rather than on the street side. The units afford visibility over that common area. Pointing to a three-dimensional rendering, he indicated that the roof treatments have changed slightly. He said the units were all oriented toward Beech Street to take advantage of the southern exposure and provide a sense of separation from the Shelter. Citing the limited funding, he said that the original plan to stucco the units has been changed to vinyl siding, a \$34,000 difference.

Addressing the technical concerns, Mr. Vitale said a clear sight triangle is not necessary due to the dead-ending of the two streets within the block. He said the units were placed close to the property lines to match surrounding conditions in the neighborhood.

Mr. Seitzinger indicated where adjoiner information was added. He referred to a 1921 utility plan showing brick sewers in Second Street. He said they modified their storm sewer profile to clear the gas main. He said documentation has been submitted to the Conservation District for an exemption or approval of erosion and sedimentation controls. He was hoping for a response by the coming Friday. He said the documentation requesting a sanitary sewer module exemption was also submitted to the Environmental Division and the Department of Environmental Protection. Mr. Miller reminded that no such exemptions were being granted for flows proposed to the Fritz Island Treatment Plant.

Mr. Miller asked for an overview of zoning variances requested of the Zoning Hearing Board. Mr. Seitzinger reviewed the list, noted on the plan. He said a "use variance" was approved previously, allowing residential uses in the Manufacturing-Commercial District. Mr. Vitale said that then planner Karl Graybill had a rezoning in mind for the parcel. Mr. Rothermel said it should be looked into. Mr. Miller said that the Zoning Hearing Board has effectively re-zoned the parcel through variances, calling it a "flawed" procedure.

Mr. Bealer inquired about the entrances to the units. Mr. Vitale indicated the front stoops on the Beech Street side. He said the canopies proposed may be eliminated for budgetary reasons. He said the residents may use entrances from the courtyard, as well.

Mr. Raffaelli asked about the firewalls proposed. Mr. Vitale said eight-inch block is proposed to meet the two-hour rating required by the building code.

Mr. Bealer asked about the fence between the parcel and 441 North Second Street. Mr. Vitale said the fence would be reset to open the courtyard to that residential unit, as well.

Mr. Bealer asked if there were any plans for the existing warehouse. Mr. Vitale reported that the Opportunity House currently uses it for storage, adding that it would probably be demolished in the future. He said there have been discussions about possible enterprises that could utilize the structure, such as a landscaping business that could compliment the Opportunity House programs. Mr. Miller said that such a possibility related to his zoning concerns. Mr. Raffaelli described it as becoming an institutional arrangement. Mr. Bealer wondered what zoning classification would be appropriate. He asked if Opportunity House had any future annexation plans. Mr. Vitale said he wasn't aware of any currently.

Mr. Rothermel asked for an approximation of the project budget. Mr. Vitale answered in the area of

\$736,000. He said the parcel would seek tax-exempt status as a non-profit venture.

Mr. Miller alluded to the Land Development Ordinance requirement of County Planning review prior to any action taken by the City Planning Commission. The County is awaiting the submission of applicable review fees prior to their review. Mr. Vitale said the contractor is “raising flags” regarding the delays and the added costs of winter-time construction. He said the Zoning Administrator indicated that the plan could be approved as “final”. He asked about the possibility of obtaining foundation permits in advance of final approval. Mr. Bealer mentioned the possibility of calling a special meeting to review the plan once the necessary documentation is received. Mr. Miller said it may be more appropriate to waive the preliminary step and grant a final approval, at that time, given this earlier opportunity to review the plan. Mr. Vitale said any further delays will be a problem according to the client. He said they were told that they could expect some advance notice of the Zoning Hearing Board’s decision in time for this meeting. Mr. Rothermel asked when the County’s review could be anticipated. Mr. Miller said that receiving timely reviews becomes a problem for applications made so close to the deadline.

Mr. Bealer motioned to table the plan pending the County Planning comments. He suggested a special meeting then be scheduled to consider the plan as a final form if those comments are “not too extensive” and the Planning staff has “a day or two” to review any changes. Mr. Palka seconded the motion. And the Commission agreed to the motion, unanimously. Mr. Vitale asked Mr. Miller to confer with the building department regarding permits, in the meantime.

Review the land development plan for the New Parking Lot, forty spaces proposed by Brentwood Industries for their facility on Brentwood Drive.

Mr. Bensinger explained the location of the project and recalled the land development approval for the Brentwood facility granted five or six years earlier. He referred to Mr. Miller’s review letter that called for more landscaping. He said the applicant would prefer not to screen the lot so as to afford maximum visibility of the building from the highway or the highway from the building. He noted that the lands east of Brentwood Drive and west of the building are wooded.

He said the additional forty spaces were necessary to accommodate new jobs and some being transferred from other locations. It drops three to four feet lower than the upper lot. Mr. Lauter stated that the screening requirements are meant to screen the view of the cars more than the building. Mr. Rothermel agreed that some additional screening would soften the appearance of the cars and enhance the appearance of an attractive building.

Mr. Miller specified the requirement for shade trees to be placed within the lot’s interior. He believed the intent was to break-up the appearance of large areas of asphalt paving and mitigate the heat island effect they have. Mr. Rothermel felt the intent was more for visual buffering and preferred the landscaping be used to flank the lot. Mr. Bensinger said they would consider it and asked if it could be worked out at the staff level. Mr. Rothermel indicated that an approval could be granted with the proviso that a landscaping plan be provided for the Commission’s consideration. Mr. Miller reminded that the interior trees were a zoning requirement. Mr. Rothermel restated the need to work out a more streamlined process between the Commission and the Zoning Hearing Board. Mr. Raffaelli added that applicants should leave themselves more lead time rather than expecting a hurried process. Mr. Bealer recalled the 90-day allowance planning agencies have under the Municipalities Planning Code. He said applicants shouldn’t expect immediate decisions, especially given the limited Planning staff. He said there is simply not enough time for staff to be verifying that conditions are met when conditional approvals are granted.

Mr. Lauter felt that buffering for aesthetic reasons was more important than the internal disbursement of trees. Mr. Rothermel regretted not requiring more landscaping along the façade of the buildings at the time of the original land development. Mr. Bealer stated his appreciation of the planting choices at the recently completed Quaker Maid facility on Morgantown Road, especially for the mix of colors.

Mr. Rothermel asked about the provisions for stormwater management. Mr. Bensinger pointed out the new detention basin planned and the existing catch basin in the driveway.

Mr. Rothermel moved to approve the new parking lot subject to the forthcoming comments of the City Engineer regarding the stormwater management, and a landscaping plan to be provided for the Commission’s review at the next meeting. Mr. Lauter seconded the motion. And the Commission approved, unanimously.

Resolution #32-2005

Review the subdivision/annexation plan for Alvernia College and the Bernardine Sisters, a land swap along their common boundary at 400 St. Bernardine Street.

Mr. Bensinger gave a brief description of the location of the parcels and their ownership. He explained that two strips of equal area (26,288 square feet) are being exchanged between the College and the Bernardine Sisters.

He didn't have detail on the terms of the exchange.

He said that revisions were made per Mr. Miller's review, including the corrections to the legal descriptions. He regretted not having signed and sealed copies of the plat in time for the Commission meeting.

Mr. Bealer asked the reasons for the exchange. Mr. Bensinger wasn't sure, but suggested it might have something to do with the common access via Adams Street.

Mr. Miller asked for time to review the amended deed descriptions prior to recording. Mr. Bealer made a motion to accept the subdivision plan with the proviso that staff had a few days to review the revisions and deems them satisfactory. Mr. Rothermel seconded. The Commission voted to approve, unanimously.

Resolution #33-2005

Other business

500 North Fifth Street, a landscaping proposal by the Centre Park Garden Club for the City-owned park.

Mr. Lauter presented on behalf of the Garden Club. He recalled the landscaping plan of a year and a half ago to remove scrub brush from the bank and plant arborvitae, ground cover and flowers. He described a "phase two" installation of a brick and cobblestone walkway that is "basically finished".

As a result of City work crews mistaking the intentional ground cover for grass and weeds, the Club proposes to construct a separation wall with about two courses of landscaping block. This will provide a more deliberate boundary for the mowing and trimming maintenance. He said the funding source has yet to be clarified, as they originally thought the materials were to be donated. They felt that, since it is City-owned and a semi-permanent construction, the Planning Commission should be consulted. Mr. Rothermel asked if the wall would have footers. Mr. Lauter hoped it would, but wasn't sure what the (vacationing) caretakers intended. Mr. Rothermel felt that they should confer with Public Works and study the slopes more closely.

Mr. Miller wondered whether the Club was seeking a simple recommendation or a more formal approval of a landscaping plan. Mr. Lauter said it has been the practice to seek the Commission's input on proposals concerning City property.

Mr. Rothermel suggested that the color of the block be considered. Mr. Lauter indicated their willingness to return to the Commission with an update when more detail is available. Mr. Reppert suggested they seek input from a landscaping professional regarding the appropriateness of the design. Mr. Rothermel commended the volunteers for taking the initiative. Mr. Bealer agreed, adding that it could save time for the City work crews, as well. Mr. Raffaelli recommended that the Club consider this discussion in their planning and return with more details at a future meeting.

Mr. Raffaelli asked if there were any questions on the August Planning Commission minutes. Mr. Bealer asked about the parenthetical question marks within the text. Mr. Miller answered that he included them where he felt the project representatives had "grossly misstated the facts". Mr. Rothermel suggested the second page reference to Mr. Bealer's letter should include some detail on its content. He also suggested that the Boylan family members referenced on the third page be added to the attendance list. He motioned to approve the August minutes with those corrections. Mr. Lauter seconded. The Commission approved the August minutes, unanimously.

Mr. Raffaelli commented on the demolition of the trellis screen adjacent to the Second and Penn Firehouse. He said Mr. Miller is researching the issue and will report his findings at a later date. Mr. Rothermel said the trellis was part of the original renovation of the building, intended to screen the parking lot and provide visual continuity to the streetscape. Mr. Reppert asked if a demolition permit wasn't required for its removal. Mr. Raffaelli commented that it was demolished over a weekend. Mr. Miller reported that Supportive Concepts (the tenant) claimed a car hit one of the supports necessitating immediate removal.

Mr. Rothermel commented on the current state of the Penn Room and the new furniture. He said the original intent of the meeting room was as an alternative to the Council Chambers. He complained that the new furniture greatly reduced capacity for public attendance. Mr. Miller remarked that they first noticed it at last month's meeting when, coincidentally, the Commission attracted one of the largest turnouts. Mr. Raffaelli recalled the Commission's criticism of the room's size in the renovation plans.

Mr. Bealer mentioned the progress of the community garden that replaced demolished homes near Opportunity House. He wondered if CDBG funds could be allocated for sidewalk/storm drain improvements. He

also hoped for a County presentation regarding their plans for other acquired and/or demolished housing. Mr. Miller indicated that a presentation would be made at the next meeting regarding the redevelopment proposals. Mr. Lauter remarked that the Artifacts Bank has been permitted to salvage prior to demolition under the terms of the County's Acquisition, Demolition and Disposition (ADD) Program. He said demolitions are carried out for different reasons and the land is often offered to the neighbors for parking or gardening potential.

Mr. Palka motioned to adjourn the meeting. Mr. Lauter seconded. Councilman Waltman asked to address the Commission. He wanted to take a public position on the Big Spring Inc. proposal, regretting not having done so earlier. He worried that the truck traffic projected would "decimate" the neighborhood. He says he can't believe the proposal can even make good business sense in its proposed location. He alluded to a conversation outside the meeting room where he informed the applicant of his opinion and position. Mr. Waltman is a six-year member of the Reading Area Transportation Study Coordinating Committee.

Mr. Raffaelli informed Mr. Waltman that the Commission could not respond to his comments while the suit was pending, on the advice of legal counsel. Mr. Waltman indicated his understanding of the situation, adding that he was just clarifying his own position. He intended to push for alternative solutions at the City Council level. He believed that it was wrong for the applicant to force the Commission's acceptance, and hoped more officials would take public positions.

The motions to adjourn were restated. And the Commission voted unanimously to adjourn the September meeting. – 9:54 pm.

AWM / awm

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