

Minutes
Regular meeting of the City of Reading Planning Commission
August 23, 2011 at 7:00 pm

Members present:

Ermete J. Raffaelli, Chairman
Brian J. Burket, Vice Chairman
Michael E. Lauter, Secretary
Wayne Jonas Bealer, Assistant Secretary

Staff present:

Andrew W. Miller, Planning Office
Charles M. Jones, Department of Public Works
Frederick T. Lachat III, Department of Law

Others present:

Clarence J. Levan Jr., Milan Drafting Group
Miguel A. Herrera, Milan Drafting Group
Rafael D. Abreu, Jet Set Restaurant LLC
Robert P. Stackhouse, Stackhouse Bensinger Inc.
Douglas F. Smith, Alvernia University
Karen H. Cook, Masano Bradley LLP
Timothy J. Krall, SSM Group Inc.
Kent D. Morey, SSM Group Inc.
Dennis Kohl, Carpenter Technology Corporation
Keith Mooney, Barley Snyder LLC
Stephen F. DeLucas, Reading Eagle Company

Chairman Raffaelli called the August meeting to order, asked presenters to sign the guest list, and asked for acceptance of the agenda. Hearing no changes, Mr. Lauter moved to accept the August 23rd agenda, as presented. Mr. Bealer seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to accept the August agenda.

Subdivision and Land Development:

Jet Set Restaurant Parking Area – parking lot land development plan [0:00.57]

Mr. Levan characterized Jet Set as a downtown presence “for some time”. He said they sought zoning relief to extend the restaurant hours from 12:00a to 2:00a. To satisfy the parking conditions, one ten-space lot on the other side of Peach Street was finished earlier that day, and seeded. The current plan proposes another 28 spaces on a lot adjacent to the restaurant on South 9th Street. He indicated that it will exit to Peach Street. It involves two parcels, under different ownership; half belongs to Jet Set and the other to Sy Do, under a ‘lease to own’ agreement, with an easement providing cross access in the meantime. He said they are willing to comply with everything cited by the Planning Office. Regarding a County Planning comment about highway occupancy (a Pennsylvania Department of Transportation permit), he explained that was approved in November 2010 with the understanding of Jet Set’s intent to develop the parking lot, and offered to forward the documentation. He said the County Conservation District issued their ‘adequacy’ approval, and a letter from the Zoning Hearing Board’s solicitor attests to the Board’s approval in July. He said Public Works has asked for additional information on the adequacy of underlying soils to handle stormwater infiltration.

Asked about the pervious paving proposed, Mr. Levan described it as asphalt, but without the typical fine aggregates so rainwater can permeate through to a stone base. On site lighting and its impacts, Mr. Levan noted existing lighting, mounted on the building, which he thought sufficient. He mentioned the residential properties surrounding the restaurant, not aware of any complaints in what he estimated to be a year-and-a-half of operation. Asked about signage and traffic controls, Mr. Levan said the revisions will show ‘do not enter’ and stop signs. He concluded that Peach Street can handle the 28 cars that would be traveling it following an event.

Hoping to address the Planning Office comments directly with staff, and host events already scheduled, Mr. Levan asked for conditional approval, permission to commence construction, and so extend the hours that much sooner. Mr. Bealer resisted, given the lack of a written zoning decision from the Hearing Board. Mr. Levan replied that his client’s attorney and the Hearing Board’s agree that the preemptive letter was sufficient. Mr. Bealer said not, and included the stormwater questions as another factor. Mr. Miller suggested working toward a record form of the plan for approval *and* endorsement at the September meeting.

Mr. Bealer moved to table the revision plan, pending proof of the permitted highway occupancy, and resolution of the City Engineer's concerns. Mr. Burket seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to table the Jet Set Restaurant parking plan.

South Campus Project (Alvernia University) – revision-to-record land development plan [0:27.26]

Mr. Stackhouse reported that they had secured the additional agency input, since the July presentation, including the County Planning Commission review and County Conservation District approval. He hoped to address any remaining concerns, and ask for conditional approval. Mr. Miller added that they have entered into a formal easement with the Bernardine Franciscan Sisters. He said there were some remaining concerns from Kenhorst with regard to the noise and lighting at the athletic field, which he thought were addressed. Mr. Smith said they were addressed a year earlier, by a 4000-square foot light barrier, moving the public-address speakers, and planting dozens of trees. He said those arrangements were addressed with the City's Zoning Hearing Board, when their permit was challenged by Kenhorst Borough. He added that they've voluntarily agreed to a tighter use schedule for the field, created a neighborhood committee to maintain communication, and posted an event schedule on the University's website. Mr. Raffaelli stressed the importance of maintaining good relations with neighboring municipalities, especially where there is shared police coverage. Mr. Stackhouse agreed to satisfy the remaining Planning Office comments. Mr. Jones said he resolved his remaining concerns with the applicant directly.

Mr. Lauter moved to grant conditional approval, based on the Planning Office review memorandum. Mr. Burket seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to conditionally-approve Alvernia's "South Campus Project" revision plan.

Resolution #69-2011

Fire Training Center Subdivision – final subdivision plan [0:35.28]

Mr. Krall, representing the County of Berks, described the facility operated by the County but on land owned by the City. He said an agreement from the previous November, memorialized in City Council's Bill No. 55-2010, allows a transfer of the property title. It will take about 9.7 acres, roughly delineated by the cyclone fencing surrounding the Training Center, from the 75-acre "Angelica Park" property, and an approximately 15-space overflow parking area on the opposite side of the driveway. He said no additional construction is proposed. He mentioned a County Planning Commission review, without objection, and the satisfaction of both the City and County solicitor's offices. A zoning permit is pending. Mr. Jones noted sanitary sewer lines crossing the area, and appropriate easements drafted to protect them. Mr. Krall affirmed that Cumru Township's main lines to the trunk cross the area, and are delineated on the plan. He said the Township's planning commission will be reviewing the matter at their September meeting. He mentioned some confusion in the parcel information because the County tax maps suggest the parcel is a part of the "Fritz Island" property, though the title search showed otherwise. He said he discussed that finding with the County's mapping, recorder and planning offices for possible corrections.

Mr. Jones raised another potential issue; the City's purchase of a property to the south on Morgantown Road, for a planned administration building intended to support the wastewater treatment operations. He said they are ready to begin planning that construction. A bridge, originally intended to span the "Mifflin Arm" of the Schuylkill River to the plant and at over a hundred feet in length, is an expensive projection. The Public Works Department is now considering the feasibility of a driveway north to intersect the existing driveway, which may interfere with the overflow parking area. He didn't want to delay the subdivision plan, but hoped for the County's cooperation should they opt for that design. He noted the necessary taking of private properties between, which may prove more costly than the original bridge option. Asked about easements across that existing driveway, Mr. Krall answered that an existing easement covered the County's access to the facility. Mr. Miller recommended tabling the plan, until the zoning permit was issued, and other questions resolved. He felt they could be addressed in the next month, and a record version of the plan produced for the September meeting. Mr. Krall asked for some clarifications on specific remarks in the Planning Office review.

Mr. Bealer moved to table the final subdivision plan, pending clarification of the access questions and Cumru Township's position. Mr. Lauter seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to table the "Fire Training Center Subdivision" plan.

Blighted Property Review Committee, certifications of blight / recommendations for reuse:

Mr. Bealer explained that the five properties listed will be pursued by the Reading Redevelopment Authority via eminent domain actions. He reminded that the City ordinance and Pennsylvania law require that the Planning Commission make a recommendation for the reuse of those properties, consistent with the zoning district in which they are located.

628 North Front Street (Franklin Heredia) – certification of blight / recommendation for reuse [0:52.56]

Mr. Bealer said the lot is intended for green space adjacent to the Hope Lutheran Church.

Mr. Bealer moved to affirm the Blighted Property Review Committee's finding of 'blight' at 628 North Front Street, and recommend a subsequent use in accord with the use and dimensional standards of the Residential 3 zoning district. Mr. Lauter seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to certify the blight, and recommend the Reading Redevelopment Authority pursue an 'R3' reuse of 628 North Front Street.

Resolution #70-2011

644 North Front Street (Walter Barrera) – certification of blight / recommendation for reuse [0:59.01]

Mr. Lauter moved to affirm the Blighted Property Review Committee's finding of 'blight' at 644 North Front Street, and recommend a subsequent use in accord with the use and dimensional standards of the Residential 3 zoning district. Mr. Burket seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to certify the blight, and recommend the Reading Redevelopment Authority pursue an 'R3' reuse of 644 North Front Street.

Resolution #71-2011

737 North 4th Street (Pamela K. Mooneram) – certification of blight / recommendation for reuse [0:59.29]

Mr. Bealer moved to affirm the Blighted Property Review Committee's finding of 'blight' at 737 North 4th Street, and recommend a subsequent use in accord with the use and dimensional standards of the Residential 3 zoning district. Mr. Burket seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to certify the blight, and recommend the Reading Redevelopment Authority pursue an 'R3' reuse of 737 North 4th Street.

Resolution #72-2011

600 North 3rd Street (Ricardo & Nury Reyes) – certification of blight / recommendation for reuse [0:59.48]

Mr. Burket moved to affirm the Blighted Property Review Committee's finding of 'blight' at 600 North 3rd Street, and recommend a subsequent use in accord with the use and dimensional standards of the Residential 3 zoning district. Mr. Lauter seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to certify the blight, and recommend the Reading Redevelopment Authority pursue an 'R3' reuse of 600 North 3rd Street.

Resolution #73-2011

602 North 3rd Street (Ricardo & Nury Reyes) – certification of blight / recommendation for reuse [1:00.04]

Mr. Lauter moved to affirm the Blighted Property Review Committee's finding of 'blight' at 602 North 3rd Street, and recommend a subsequent use in accord with the use and dimensional standards of the Residential 3 zoning district. Mr. Burket seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to certify the blight, and recommend the Reading Redevelopment Authority pursue an 'R3' reuse of 602 North 3rd Street.

Resolution #74-2011

Other business:

§609.c review-petition to rezone ??? Leiszs Bridge Road, R1 to HM (Carpenter Technology Corporation) [1:00.28]

Mr. Miller explained the address ambiguity in the heading; no number is associated with the address on the County tax maps. Mr. Mooney, indicated the City-Muhlenberg Township boundary, and requested the Planning Commission consider a recommendation to City Council to rezone a portion of Carpenter's property in the Residential 1 (R1) zoning district. Mr. Morey described of the orientation of the property, and the portion in the City. Mr. Mooney speculated the area was zoned R1, prior to the construction of the Warren Street By-pass, as a part of Riverdale neighborhood to the west. He said Carpenter plans to extend Building 118, and requires Heavy Manufacturing (HM) zoning to permit it. He reported on a "pre-application neighborhood meeting", held the day before, attended by only two local landowners. One asked Carpenter to buy his property. The other questioned a watercourse that crosses his property, from Carpenter's, that has caused an erosive impact in the area of his garage. That neighbor asked if Carpenter can do anything to address it. Characterizing it an existing condition, Mr. Mooney said development under current stormwater regulations may lessen that impact, but in any case would not increase it. Asked to describe the topography between Carpenter and the residential areas, Mr. Morey noted the watercourse, which is partially piped underground on its course to the Schuylkill River, some vacant lots that are mostly wooded, moderate slopes, and a visual barrier from an earthen mound. He said the new construction wouldn't be any higher than the existing, and clarified the existing and proposed portions on the plan. He explained the locations of "lay down areas" and an access road. He said the expansion would be 41,000 square feet, about 5000 of it in the City. Tall pine trees along the fence line contribute to the screening of Riverdale, as will more plantings proposed as part of the stormwater management plan. Asked if the currently-undeveloped lots could be developed and still enjoy effective screening, Mr. Morey said the tree row extends the length of the property line. Mr. Kohl described it as a

“forge-finishing” operation being expanded; large diameter bars polished and cut before additional finishing steps undertaken at Carpenter’s ‘western shore’ facilities. Mr. Mooney assured that no noxious odors were a part of that process. Mr. Kohl said there wouldn’t be any increase in noise levels. They simply need larger equipment to meet a demand for larger products. He added that there are no doors on the west side of the building, and that the traffic circulation and lay-down areas are also on the east side. Mr. Mooney offered to provide the transcript from the neighborhood meeting early the next week.

Mr. Burket moved to recommend City Council rezone the City portion of the Leiszs Bridge Road property from Residential 1 (R1) to Heavy Manufacturing (HM). Mr. Bealer seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to recommend rezoning of ??? Leiszs Bridge Road.

Resolution #75-2011

§303.a.1 review-River Road Extension (Department of Public Works) [1:19.19]

Mr. Jones distributed some visual renderings, and explained the background and motivation for the study; the 2005 proposal for a water-bottling plant west of Clinton Street, and traffic concerns raised for West Green Street and Schuylkill Avenue. What began as a look at extending River Road south to Buttonwood Street, was abandoned due to a radioactive ‘slag pile’, remediated with rip rap, which cannot be disturbed, and a historic canal lock opposite that. The distance between precludes the development of a necessary right-of-way. They then turned their attention, and the Department of Transportation’s to a northward extension. Congressmen Gerlach was credited for securing the funding for a feasibility study, and PennDOT for offering its consultant. The result is nothing more than a feasibility study; the route suggested is subject to revision in a design stage. Mr. Jones described the orientation of the suggested route, required intersection improvements, and potential historic considerations. He showed a route extending through the former Dana Corporation properties to Centre Avenue, via Union Street, with new signalized intersections. He said the study revealed the impact to residences on Center Avenue to be limited, and less than would be associated with other options. At the southern end, improvements between Spring and Windsor Streets would cross the School District’s property where a new elementary school has been previously considered (see: “Elementary Schools at 245 West Windsor Street” in the September 9, 2008 minutes). He said that plan would still fit, though they’ve yet to meet with the School District officials. The next phase would include meetings with all affected landowners, as well as environmental studies. He briefly described the required improvements to the Windsor Street and Schuylkill Avenue intersection; two small side streets to be cut off, reducing a six-way intersection to four, and signalized. Showing a cross section of the possible roadway, he indicated an on-street parking lane, if deemed necessary, a shared-use path on one side and a standard sidewalk on the other. He said most of the former Dana buildings have been removed for possible redevelopment, though thick concrete pads remain, and will add to the construction costs, as may still-unknown environmental conditions. A historic farm house on Spring Street must be avoided, precluding the use of Eckert Street. He recalled a public meeting at the Northwest Middle School, drawing about a dozen residents, most of whom were happy to see the City doing something to address the current traffic conditions. He said preliminary engineering is the next step, involving land-owner and regulatory-agency coordination, and an environmental-impact analysis. He estimated that could be completed by 2013. It represents the bulk of the design work, fixing alignments and rights-of-way. Optimistically, the road could be opened in 2016, assuming cooperation and a united front by policymakers. He said funds have already been made available for the preliminary design, and following a similar presentation to City Council, it will be proposed for the “Twelve-Year (Transportation) Program”. Asked about the number of affected property owners, Mr. Jones characterized a comparatively few, including Carpenter Technology and the current owner of the former Dana properties. He hoped to have the project underway before the area fills in with new industrial development, noting one project already being pursued. Asked about the potential of new rail sidings, he said it wasn’t covered in the feasibility study, but the elevations would allow for grade crossings at angles. He expressed enthusiasm for the rare opportunity of new road construction, and complimented McCormick Taylor Inc. on the feasibility study. Asked if a recommendation was in order, Mr. Miller deferred to the Commission members. He said the presentation satisfies the Municipalities Planning Code requirement that planning agencies review the opening of new streets.

Mr. Bealer moved to acknowledge the opportunity to review the feasibility study, and recommend proceeding with the preliminary and environmental design phase. Mr. Lauter seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to recommend continued planning of the “River Road Extension”.

Resolution #76-2011

review the draft July 26, 2011 meeting minutes [1:44.16]

As the meeting materials mailed failed to reach the Commission members prior to the meeting, Mr. Miller recommended they delay action to the September meeting.

Mr. Bealer, reporting on the Blighted Property Review Committee's activity, said the first of the eminent-domain proceedings were underway. Of the eight properties in that first group, Our City-Reading Inc. has agreed to take and rehabilitate five, with another to be acquired by Neighborhood Housing Services of Greater Berks Inc.; all for single-family homeownership. He felt they were beginning to see positive results, and a smoother process. The September 15th and October 20th determination hearings will review 12 properties and 15 respectively. In 2012, the Review Committee will attempt to review 20 properties a month, and 30 properties a month in 2013. He said they also hope to amend the guiding ordinance to include commercial properties in their scrutiny, motivated in part by the abandoned 'bottling plant' property. And, seeking to focus its efforts on the worst areas, the Review Committee may consider every property on Hudson Street.

Progress on various other projects underway was discussed.

Mr. Lauter moved to adjourn. Mr. Burket seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to adjourn the August 23rd meeting. - 9:10p