

Minutes
Regular meeting of the City of Reading Planning Commission
November 22, 2011 at 7:00 pm

Members present:

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

Staff present:

Andrew W. Miller, Planning Office
Frederick T. Lachat III, Department of Law

Others present:

Scott T. Miller, Stackhouse Bensinger Inc.
Lee C. Olsen, Olsen Design Group Architects
Stephen F. DeLucas, Reading Eagle Company

Chairman Raffaelli called the November meeting to order. Mr. Lauter moved to accept the November 22nd agenda. Mr. Bealer seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to accept the November agenda.

Subdivision and Land Development:

9th & Green Streets Apartments (Berks County Redevelopment Authority) – final subdivision and land development plan [0:00.22]

Scott Miller greeted the Commission, and deferred to Mr. Olsen to explain the motivation for the project. Mr. Olsen said they were commissioned by the Berks County Redevelopment Authority to “create a living design”, on the site, and that the Authority has an agreement of sale with Our City-Reading Inc., with whom they had collaborated before. He described six residential units, in a design somewhat restricted by the size of the site.

Scott Miller elaborated: a six-unit, two-story apartment building, with the one-and-a-half parking spaces per unit required, some accessible from the alley and recessed to provide the necessary “back-up area”. Of those nine spaces, one will be reserved and marked as ‘handicapped’. A small trash enclosure is proposed, likely for plastic storage containers rather than a full dumpster. He mentioned a stormwater-management challenge, and a planned underground detention facility, which would lead to an existing inlet on Green Street. Landscaping and vegetated screening is proposed, and the sidewalk of their frontage on North 9th Street will be reconstructed. As a ‘state road’, the driveway and underground utility connections will require a highway-occupancy permit from the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation. He referred to review letters from the Planning Office and the Department of Public Works, expecting to address the issues raised by the next meeting.

Asked about the condition of the alley, Scott Miller said they weren’t proposing any changes; its narrow ten-foot width would be supplemented with an extra ten-foot depth in the off-street parking, for back-up maneuvers. He mentioned a number of neighboring garages built to the property line. Mr. Olsen continued with a more-detailed description of the floor plans and façades; four one-bedroom units and two two-bedroom units, with a balcony element. The rooftop-mechanical equipment will be screened by the design of the roof, but easily accessible for servicing. Showing the elevations, he mentioned an effort at reflecting the residential feel of the surroundings, such as the dormers included in the pitched roof. He said brick is proposed on the North 9th Street side, with vinyl siding for the others. A geothermal-heating system is being included as a ‘bid alternate’. They had initially considered pursuing an environmental-design certification. And while the added expense proved to be prohibitive, they still hope to employ those principals wherever possible. He estimated the project to cost between \$750 thousand and \$1 million.

Mr. Olsen confirmed that the Authority intends to own and manage the property, after construction. Mr. Lauter questioned the 90-degree turn (to south) from the ‘front’ of the other buildings on the block. Mr. Olsen answered that the project would have been “row home infill, hands down”, if not for the off-street parking requirement. Concerns were raised regarding the vinyl siding, including: aesthetics, flammability, and ultra-violet deterioration (from the southern exposure). Andrew Miller wondered if the cement-board siding was a competitive alternate. Mr. Lauter felt the southern façade was the more visible, especially to those traveling North 9th Street. Mr. Olsen said he’d reevaluate those options and costs with the owner. Andrew Miller acknowledged the design team’s consideration of the ordinances, and their presenting a plan that wouldn’t require zoning variances.

Mr. Raffaelli asked about their intended “market”; if the project included subsidized units. Mr. Olsen didn’t know, and offered to ask the Authority. Mr. Raffaelli wondered how the County got involved in the land, and

alluded to a previous, and more-comprehensive initiative for the neighborhood. Scott Miller said they'd address the review comments, and expected to return with a revised plan at the December meeting.

Mr. Bealer moved to table the 'final' plan. Mr. Lauter seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to table the County Redevelopment Authority's "9th & Green Streets Apartments" plan.

Mr. Raffaelli suggested a motion to schedule a meeting with the Reading Redevelopment Authority, the Berks County Redevelopment Authority, and the in-coming mayor's administration to address "a number of other issues" with the proposal. Asked what the Reading Redevelopment Authority had to do with it, Mr. Raffaelli said there were issues to consider, again referencing other initiatives for the block, but declining to discuss them publicly.

Other business:

§508.3 agreement to extension-Acevedo Downing St. Subdivision [0:39.22]

Mr. Raffaelli noted that this request made six such extensions. He recommended denying it, and directing the applicant to make another application when ready to proceed. Andrew Miller said there wasn't much impact on the Planning Office from the repeated extensions.

Mr. Lauter moved to accept the 90-day extension, as requested in a November 16th letter. Mr. Bealer seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to extend its review of the "Acevedo Downing St. Subdivision" plan by 90 days, per the Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code's time limits (§508.3) for plan review.

Resolution #85-2011

review the draft October 25, 2011 meeting minutes [0:41.52]

Mr. Lauter moved to accept the October meeting minutes, as presented. Mr. Bealer seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to accept the October 25th meeting minutes.

Resolution #86-2011

Mr. Bealer reported on a November 10th "blighted-property workshop", hosted by Albright College, covering the new Act 90 powers for municipalities to use against "deadbeat" landlords and property owners. He named a number of other City staff and officials in attendance, including the Commission's own Brian Burket.

Mr. Bealer then reported on a November 17th redistricting committee meeting, also attended by Brian Burket, when they approved a new map of the City's council districts. He said they divided the districts 'by ward', rather than by streets, in an attempt at better continuity. A follow-up meeting is planned and, afterward, the map will be presented to City Council. He said the proposed districts differ by less than 1% of the optimum population of 14,680. In terms of public input, he said someone attended the meeting concerned that they would "gerrymander" a district without a Hispanic majority. He said the closest, District 4, is still 51% Latino.

Mr. Lauter moved to adjourn. Mr. Bealer seconded. And the Commission voted unanimously to adjourn the November 22nd meeting. - 7:53p