

The stated meeting of the Planning Commission of the Township of Abington was held on Tuesday, August 28, 2018 at the Abington Senior High School, Abington, PA., with Vice Chairman Ron Rosen presiding.

CALL TO ORDER: 7:33 p.m.

ROLL CALL: Present: DiCELLO, GAUTHIER, COOPER, BAKER, ROSEN, RUSSELL, BOFF
Excused: ROBINSON, STRACKHOUSE

Also Present: Director of Engineering MONTGOMERY
Office Manager WYRSTA
Commissioners: SANCHEZ, ZAPPONE, KLINE, SPIEGELMAN
THOMPSON, BRODSKY
Township Solicitor CLARKE
County Planner NARCOWICH

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

Agenda Item PC2 – Application of Robert Razzi:

Mr. Rosen read agenda item PC2 into the record.

Mr. Rosen said aside from changing property lines are there any improvements contemplated for either of the properties?

Robert Razzi, 733 Seminole Avenue, applicant, replied none.

Mr. Rosen asked for any comments from members of the Planning Commission.

Ms. Gauthier asked what will the garage be used for?

Mr. Razzi replied it will be storage for antique car.

Mr. DiCello made a MOTION, seconded by Mr. Rosen to approve the application of Robert Razzi for properties located at 865 and 869 Jenkintown Road, Elkins Park, PA, as presented.

MOTION was ADOPTED 7-0.

Agenda Item PC3 - BET Investments, Inc:

Mr. Rosen read agenda Item PC3 into the record, and asked the applicant to present their plan.

Mr. Michael Markman, President, BET Investments, 200 Dryden Road, Suite 2000, Dresher, PA, 19025, said we are looking for recommendation on the zoning change to A/O text amendment. Plan showed proposed 188 restricted residential units and density has been reduced from 50 units per acre to 24 with the ability to earn bonuses for 36 units per acre; building coverage was reduced to 50%; impervious coverage was reduced to 70%; green area has been increased to 30%; and building height is proposed at 50 feet and 40 feet within 100 feet of a boundary of residential zoned area.

Mr. Matt Johnson, Development Manager, BET Investments, presented plan of building height that is four stories above, below-grade parking, and three stories as it gets closer to neighboring property. Six-foot fence or wall is proposed along with hedges and trees along property line and additional landscape buffer to shield the buildings. Existing zoning is R-3 and CS and a slide showed what could be built under that zoning and images were shown of former YMCA as compared to surrounding buildings. New theme of proposed building is contemporary farmhouse with stone that fits in with surrounding buildings. The low walls will replicate what is prevalent around Abington and along Old York Road and gable roofs will be on building along major roads, but will not be on the back side of the property, so as to lower the height of the building against the neighbors, and lush landscape buffer will be provided. View of proposed building on Huntingdon Road was presented as well as proposed pocket-park.

Mr. Markman continued that in regards to the cemetery; we are proposing a multi-year program where we would fund restoration of the cemetery by documenting where all the graves sites are and help fund research of the history of those who are buried there dating back to the 1700's.

We have agreed to contribute to offsite improvements in the amount of \$100,000 towards matching portion of grants for improvements to the intersection.

In regard to traffic; weekday peak mornings are 195 less trips than the YMCA generated; weekday peak afternoon 179 less trips on the road, so traffic would be less with our project.

Mr. Mark Roth, McMahon Associates, said we conducted that traffic impact study for this property, and information was taken from trip generation manual specifically for senior adult housing complexes throughout the country and we took counts at the driveways of existing facility. Every driveway has to meet certain criteria for sight distance and diagram was presented that showed points of where measurements were taken along Susquehanna Road.

Mr. Russell asked when HOP Highway Occupancy Permit application is submitted to PennDOT, do they review it against acceptable or minimum.

Mr. Roth replied PennDOT reviews it against both. Additional data was collected at the site, and on Susquehanna Road today, there are gaps in traffic and we measure available gaps and combined egress movements and available gaps were measured at 236 and 223, respectively. Available gap is a seven second time in traffic.

Mr. Rosen asked for any comments from members of the Planning Commission.

Mr. Russell asked what could be built today with the zoning that is currently in place.

Mr. Johnson replied under CS District, a 45-foot tall building could be built and under R-3, a 35-foot tall building could be built.

Mr. Rosen asked for any public comments.

Christopher Germain, 1092 Huntingdon Road, provided a video on the history of the site as well as view of how this facility would like from his home noting that he was opposed to the project.

Herb McMahan, 1046 Huntingdon Road, said we have a once in a lifetime opportunity to get this right, and he was opposed to the text amendment. County Planner Mike Narcowich, MCPC indicated that the MCPC was opposed to the text amendment based on density in a letter dated, January 20, 2018. Revised proposal is still 250% greater than what is allowable under A/O, Section 102 of the Zoning Ordinance talks about minimizing traffic congestion and mitigating the impact of more intense uses to maintain character of the surrounding homes. Old York Road Corridor Study - Page 199, Paragraph 5 – recommends 15-25 dwelling units per acre and BET proposes with bonuses for open space is at 36.

He feels this is spot zoning and this will set precedent for future developers to write their own text amendment that would be rewriting Township Zoning Ordinances. Also, a petition was signed by more than 100 people and provided to the Planning Commission

Barbara Evans, President of the Rydal Park Residents Association, read a letter into the record that she wrote to the Abington Township Board of Commissioners and Planning Commission members regarding their opposition to proposed BET development at Old York and Susquehanna Roads due to concern of how it will impact homes at Rydal Park, and she urged the Board to turn down BET's proposal.

Phyllis Redmond, 540 Wanamaker Road, expressed concern about flood water management and excess runoff from loss of green space with this proposed building and where will the water be diverted? She was opposed to anything that will increase risk to her home.

Mr. Peter Clelland, Vice President of Development, BET Investments, replied we have studied where the site drainage goes today and that is Tookany Creek, and regardless of which watershed it flows to, we will need to manage stormwater in accordance with Township regulations.

Chris Van Buren, 1601 Meadowbrook Road, expressed support for the development as he would like to have that type of option. He would like to see a significant investment made in that area that could spur on further improvements along Rt. 611.

Bernadette Wilkinson, 1245 Bockius Avenue, said if the zoning is changed for one company then that sets precedent. She does not want "Abington to start looking like Philadelphia," and she wants Abington to remain the wonderful small-town community that we are, so she was opposed to BET's proposal.

Pat Parkhill, 1053 Church Street, commented that she has looked at the plan for Abington Terrace and she feels it would be a nice addition to Old York Road. This building is something she would like to move into as a senior citizen and there is a need for over-55 communities like this.

Dr. Van Hellerslia, 1047 Huntingdon Road, said she is opposed to the text amendment because of increase density and impact on traffic and she requested the project be kept to current zoning laws.

Bruce Murray, 1035 Highland Avenue, commented that he would like to see two or three more developments such as this one built on Old York Road above Edge Hill Road. This will dramatically enhance our community and he hopes this project is approved.

Resident of Papermill Road, said this project is very ugly and too big and it needs to be smaller and setback. She questioned whether the developer will still take on the cemetery project, if they do not get this approved.

Bethany Lipa, 1056 Huntingdon Road, said in regards to the developer's proposed pocket park; the neighbors on Huntingdon Road have not asked for a pocket park as we deserve and prefer an intact neighborhood. We do not agree with increasing green space in exchange for a "fragmented neighborhood."

“Gifting the neighbors with a park in exchange for three increase density allowances per acre does not seem fair to us and shame on you if you approve the text amendment, so please make the ethical choice and decline the proposed text amendment and stick with the current zoning.” The cemetery is a worthy cause, but a pocket park that divides our neighborhood is not.

Mike Brahler, 765 Moredon Road, expressed concern about the coverage in which the developer is asking for 50% and the wall and the mass of the building will be oppressive and nothing will grow on the north side. The building is too big for this area and will create other issues.

Joe Rosack, 1927 Susquehanna Road, expressed concern about pedestrian traffic and he feels something cannot be built of such high density without making the sidewalks wider because walking down that street along the cemetery is dangerous.

Mr. Markman said part of the plan is to restore the sidewalk all the way around the cemetery and increase the size of the sidewalk next to our property.

Cakky Evans, 1132 Lindsay Lane, EAC member, said since the developer has not submitted how they are going to justify density bonuses, she requested that a decision not be made this evening. Also, the EAC sent a letter to the Planning Commission urging them to oppose the text amendment as it undermines the Township’s Zoning Ordinance, and she read the letter into the record.

Karen McNair, 1918 Adams Avenue, commented that she finds this development very attractive and 55-plus housing would be a great use for this property and would love to see that as one of her neighbors. The renderings have improved and are more fitting with existing buildings in the area. In regards to the text amendment; table in Section 1 C was updated to a minimum lot area of five acres and Section 2-7 a. still says, “four acres.” Bonus features were all quantitative except for the streetscape section.

Mr. Rosen requested that the developer to provide a better understanding on how those bonus features will impact the area.

Diane Marsh, 1779 Brook Road, said her mother wrote a letter in opposition to the project. Also, she requested that the zoning ordinance is honored as well as the people and community. She feels the BET building is obtrusive, intrusive and is not something that should be on this historic corner and does not endorse losing the historic building there.

Heidi Kleiman, 1785 Brook Road, express concern about community engagement and whether it meets the needs of current Abington demographics and she does not want to see that change.

Marianne Bustin, 1610 Cloverly Lane, said she is opposed to this development for all of the reasons everyone has mentioned.

Rudolph DeMassa, 717 Moredon Road, said he has heard tonight that your constituents do not want an apartment complex in their Township because it deviates from maximum allowable densities and they do not agree with proposed text amendment. How many more signatures and how many more meetings are needed before finally agreeing that the people you represent do not want this type of deviation from our new zoning ordinance.

Lora Lehmann, 1431 Bryant Lane, expressed concern about the public meeting process on this project. She asked about other parcels that would be impacted by proposed text amendment.

Mr. Markman said the parcel with requirements of text amendment zoned A/O within 2,000 feet of a hospital, which would be Holy Redeemer Hospital and the only other A/O parcel that could be impacted would need to have five acres, which would be the Meadowbrook Apartment site that is fully developed. It is a process that takes time when modifying the plan after listening to comments.

Text amendment was reviewed by Mr. Narcowich, Mr. Penecale and Township Solicitor Clarke. Density bonuses were presented and read into the record. Density bonuses are to insure that a high-quality project is to be built by adding more density to the site.

Mr. Michael Narcowich, County Planner, Montgomery County Planning Commission, said regarding the bonus feature standard for decorative streetscape; it could be "tightened up a bit" by specifying the amount of street furniture and percentage of decorative paving.

Mr. Rosen questioned whether bonuses have been offered for structured parking and density for a use that is surrounded only by residential.

Mr. Narcowich replied no, not that he can think of. Also, this plan is a new reiteration of BET's proposal and has improved significantly in some ways and the applicant has incorporated recommendations made by Township staff to an extent. Proposed building length is comparable to existing A/O; however, this is a very dense project and he suggested breaking up the mass of the building so to not dwarf the nationally registered historic building across the street, which should be a high priority. Also, he would like to see a building length of 150 to 200 linear feet, so the building is not perceived as too massive. Green areas on top of parking structures should be written into the zoning text so that it is binding and that there should be adequate green space. In regards to the public process, "the Planning Commission is doing the right thing."

Mr. Rosen requested that at the end of each member's comments to indicate whether or not they are prepared to make a recommendation in favor or opposed to the further submission to the Board of Commissioners for consideration and approval.

Also, Lucy Strackhouse, Chairperson could not be here this evening; however, her comments were sent by text and read into the record as follows:

"I am not in favor of the current text amendment as proposed by BET Investments for the project at the YMCA site. The redevelopment of the YMCA property will profoundly affect the character of the streetscape, quality of life in the surrounding neighborhood and development in the Township. Recommendations and requests by neighbors, civic associations and Township Commissioners have not been adequately addressed.

Further, adaptive reuse of the YMCA or a portion of the original building should be more fully investigated. The YMCA was built in 1915 and designed by well-known Philadelphia Architect Mantle Fielding and is a classic example of the "great YMCA" movement of the early 20th Century and is an integral part of the institutional history of Abington Township. A good example of adaptive reuse of an institutional building can be seen in the reuse of the Abington School directly across the street from this project. Our built heritage is disappearing and we should make every effort to preserve landmark buildings such as the Abington YMCA."

Mr. Baker thanked everyone for their comments. "It is interesting to see the renderings and I could comment architecturally on them and I would like to see a more residential-feel from the back of the building facing the neighbors and I feel the developer dropped the ball on that a little bit. But for me, it comes down to density. I feel like this project could move forward smoothly if the density was greatly reduced and the dwelling units per acre and I think it is too high. I like the bonus features, but I think if you start at 24 and move up to 36 that is too much. I think you could create a great, beautiful project if it was smaller on a more appropriate scale."

Mr. Cooper said "I'm torn. I was happy tonight to hear that some people are in favor because I do think there is a need for older housing in our Township, but there is an overwhelming, loud majority of folks that have concern that I think still needs to be addressed such as density and setback. I think traffic has been beat to death, and according to the traffic studies, it will be less and that is great. Water runoff, we have problems now and anyone who builds knows it has to be contained, but my major concerns are density and setback at the moment."

Mr. Russell said “I heard again tonight someone say ‘at the beginning of the process, the Commissioners told the developer to go back to the community and the Planning Commission because they did not want to talk about it until after they received input.’ This is our third meeting here and I think the developer, in my opinion, they can’t listen to all of the comments, but try to address it as much as possible. In terms of meeting the burden of something that could be moved onto the next step, I think it can.”

Mr. Boff said “one of the things I have been impressed with is the amount of effort that has been put into the revising of the zoning code and I think it was a very thoughtful and effective process, so I think we really need to see a compelling reason to make any kind of changes to the work that has been done in the past and I am just not sure that I have seen enough to say that “yes” I feel compelled to allow this kind of variation.”

Mr. DiCello said “I think the revisions that have been made to the plan thus far have been very good and I like that BET has been taking the consideration of the community and revising their plans; however, I do have some concerns regarding the text amendment. The bonus features are a little bit concerning to me in the way they are structured and I think that could be revised a little bit, but with regards to the project as a whole, I think it will be a benefit to the community. I think there is a need for this type of housing and the limited location work can actually be done and I think this would be a good site for it.”

Ms. Gauthier said “first of all, I definitely concur with our Chair Lucy Strackhouse regarding the historic features on the site and further investigation because the YMCA is currently eligible to be on the current National Register and recently I saw from the Historical Society that Milton Colton donated the four acres of land to the YMCA and money to build it. Now I am assuming the YMCA knows they have a clear deed and you might want to check that to make sure it wasn’t donated for long-term, so that is something I would suggest be checked. I think donating to the cemetery from anyone would be fine, but protecting the existing resources on the site is more important.

I do think there is some merit to a senior housing proposal on the site for redevelopment. Various sections of the Comprehensive Plan in Section 8 and Section 9 talk about housing for senior citizens making sure there are a wide variety of choices.

Also, everyone has been saying to ‘keep the existing zoning’ and the R-3 and CS Districts allow nursing home facilities and life care facilities and the dimensional standards for those uses, E-10 and E-12 are close to what is being proposed and age-restricted housing is a similar use and is needed in the Township based on our Comprehensive Plan.

My feeling is not to forward the amendment that we saw tonight to the Board of Commissioners and my opinion is to say “no” because when it comes back to us as a public meeting I would have various issues regarding the rezoning to A/O.”

Mr. Rosen asked for the density requirement for E-10 and E-12 uses.

Ms. Gauthier replied maximum building area - 40%; impervious surface – 70%; green area- 30%; front yard – 100 feet, but need to recheck that; rear and side yard – 50 feet and building height - 40 feet. So I would suggest that E-10 and E-12 uses are both permitted by conditional use in the CS and R-3 Districts and to amend the ordinance to allow for senior housing in those districts.

Mr. Rosen said “my feeling is and always has been that I would not be party to a development where I think that the existing residents are being put in a position that is detrimental to where they would be if the development was granted. I have also watched the evolution of degradation of development and the diminishment of meaningful development on the Old York Road Corridor and in the surrounding area. So I am also very mindful of trying to present a vision of Abington that is prosperous and impressive.

In that regard, I also have to consider that we do not live in a small town residential community. As much as we might like to think of ourselves as living in that environment, we do not, and we cannot turn our eyes away from the fact that Rt. 611 is a major corridor for traffic connecting the city to the suburbs and beyond.

There is an existing need for 55-plus housing and I know that is something that is attractive and the other point to be made is developers, when they make a decision to invest their money, feel strongly that there is an opportunity to produce a product that would be well-received in the community and I personally leave that risk to the developer. So it seems to me that when you really put your arms around the entire project, what we have to do is balance all of the factors and it seems to me that the only issue that we are really talking about is density and perhaps setback.

The ascetic features; four or five people from the community have said it looks ‘ok’ and I can’t believe that you drive up Old York Road going north of Susquehanna and you are not taken by the fact that we have a hospital sitting on the front of Old York Road, and this is no different or not any more dramatic. There are ascetic features that some of you may object to and others may find perfectly appropriate, so it is very hard for me to make a recommendation based on not liking the look of it or that it looks a little too big. What does matter to me is how it impacts the existing neighbors and does it satisfy a need for our community and advance the interests of Abington.

So we are not dealing with whether we think the process might not have been as straight forward as you would like and I believe everyone has come to the table in good faith in trying to arrive at a resolution that makes sense for all of us.

The only issue is density and we cannot ignore the fact that there has been a traffic study that says it is traffic-taming, and as a practical matter, do you feel happier having the YMCA as your neighbor rather than having a group of senior residents nearby. Why is one better or worse than the other? So I do not take offense that this is not a community service entity as opposed to a community serving entity, which a 55-plus community would be.

The developers in this particular case are not people who are running away. These are big people with big reputations who live in the neighborhood and all of those things are for a project that I think presumptively will be a terrific project and you can look at what they have done similarly in adjacent communities. I know there is Dublin Terrace that is very similar in concept, so I am not prepared to say that I am in love with these bonus features or that I think the density involved is exactly what I like, but I would like to move forward with the idea of bringing us closer to a positive outcome and where the neighbors are not profoundly impacted in any adverse way.

I live nearby and driven this street 50 times and tried to consider how I would feel being next to this apartment house, so when you synthesize all of these things, I think this is a net positive for the community and it speaks well for the faith that we are doing something proactive for development. The economics are relatively strong for us so I am going to register a conditional positive recommendation on this and we have all been instructed by the comments made by the community. I could not thank the community more for the clarity of their prospective and passion they presented.

I know the importance and everyone here takes this project very seriously, but we really have to think about that there are a lot of people who are not as directly impacted in this as everyone here is and many of them are not going to be involved in the process. So it is very hard to make a decision based solely on those who spoke "yes" or "no," but we are committed to serving the residents.

I think the process has been very productive and educational and the developer has worked with the community and we want something that all of us can cheer about.

The Planning Commission is an advisory Board appointed by the Board of Commissioners and what has been said does not reflect the final decision and they will make their own judgment."

Mr. Rosen called for the vote.

Mr. Cooper said "as it is written currently, I am in favor of the project, but I cannot accept the text amendment as it is written."

Mr. Boff said "I do not accept the proposed amendment."

Mr. DiCello said "I am not in agreement with the text amendment."

Mr. Russell said "I am in agreement."

Mr. Baker said "I cannot accept the text amendment."

Ms. Gauthier said "I do think the Township Board of Commissioners should consider the redevelopment of the YMCA site and be more proactive in looking at the proposed text amendment to see if it is something they think would be beneficial to the Township because I do think it has some merits, so I would say thumbs up to pass it onto the Board of Commissioners for advertisement and to go through the public process of tweaking and then deciding whether to adopt the proposed text amendment."

Mr. Rosen said "comments made by Lucy Strackhouse are on record, so we will count that as a negative. And I am for the concept, but I have some questions about the bonus features and I would like this project to be further refined and considered, so I would like the project to go forward to the Commissioners for their further consideration."

Mr. DiCello said "I want to clarify that I want to see this project continue and not kill it with my vote and I do want to see it continue. The next step is to have the Commissioners review it and that is what I would like to see done."

Vote: 4 in favor, 4 opposed.

ADJOURNMENT: 10:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Liz Vile, Recording Secretary