

LOWER PAXTON TOWNSHIP
PLANNING COMMISSION
BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT
WORKSHOP MEETING

April 20, 2009

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT

Fredrick Lighty
Ernest Gingrich
Dennis Guise
Roy Newsome
Douglas Grove
Robin Lindsey

ALSO PRESENT

Lori Wissler, Planning & Zoning Officer
Dianne Moran, Planning & Zoning Officer
Professor Goktug Morcol
Watson Fisher, SWAN Representative

CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Lighty called the workshop meeting of the Lower Paxton Township Planning Commission to order at 5:30 pm, on April 20, 2009 in Room 174 of the Lower Paxton Township Municipal Center, 425 Prince Street, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE TO THE FLAG

Mr. Lighty led the recitation of the Pledge.

DISCUSSION WITH PROFESSOR MORCOL

Mr. Lighty introduced Professor Goktug Morcol.

Originally from Turkey, Prof. Morcol is an Associate Professor of Public Administration and Public Policy at Penn State Harrisburg. He has been in Harrisburg for six years. Prior to Harrisburg, he studied in Georgia for 6-8 years. Before that he was in Virginia, and Turkey.

His area of interest is metropolitan governance, local governments and authorities, most specifically business improvement districts. He has been studying with several colleagues, beginning in Georgia, with their Community Improvement Districts. They also studied California, Washington DC, and New Jersey, while working on their book which presents the many different perspectives. There are chapters on Canada, Ireland and the UK as well as US cities. The idea of improvement districts is spreading like wildfire, in Germany, Serbia, Albania, Japan, and South Africa. As a public administration scholar, Prof. Morcol's interest is from the perspective of public policy and public administration.

Prof. Morcol stated that one question is are the districts public or private entities. Legally, they have characteristics of both. Academically, he has to be objective. Personally, he genuinely likes them,

for the fact that they help improve areas that may be hard hit or suffering economically. It is difficult to measure their impact, but it can be seen and felt.

Mr. Lighty stated that Lower Paxton Township has selected an area, and come up with some ideas that could be useful there. They are now soliciting advice and professional opinions regarding the next step.

Mr. Newsome stated there are some physical issues, and a need to compete with other retail areas. Mr. Newsome asked what would come of things if everyone created an improvement district to deal with such issues. Prof. Morcol noted that Lower Paxton Township's process began in 2007, and that the process is generally slow and normally takes two to four years to create an improvement district. Patience and perseverance are very important, as well as leadership, to go through this and he noted this is not an easy task. The first priority has to be to find a few select business owners to champion this project. They will be key in convincing the others. There will always be opposition, but that is also very normal.

In response to Mr. Newsome's concerns about competition and everyone creating districts, Prof. Morcol has found that BIDs are in competition, but at the same time they understand that they are in this together. This was especially true in Atlanta and Philadelphia. The competition is not cut-throat, but the ones in Philadelphia have a clear understanding that someone's gain does not mean their own loss. If they work together, in an informal network, they can exchange information, support each other, pool their resources, all while in friendly competition.

Prof. Morcol noted that BIDs are not all-powerful, they are interdependent with the state and local governments. The leadership of the BID will understand this and work with it. Center City in Philadelphia is the largest BID in the nation and maybe the world, in terms of budget and their influence. They have a policy of working with other BIDs and act as an incubator to help start other BIDs. In return, they benefit.

Cumberland, a vibrant suburban area outside of Atlanta, has a mall and many developments around it. The Cumberland Community Improvement District (CCID) was the first in Georgia, and works to help other improvement districts. They are all involved in informal associations of improvement districts.

There are CID's similar to the area of Lower Paxton Township. Cumberland is one because it is suburban, but is not lineal. Town Center Area CID is more geographically similar. Barrett Parkway runs through it and connects it.

Prof. Morcol noted that many BIDs are created when businesses are in some form of decline. The Atlanta area created one for the opposite reason. The area was booming and very successful, it was so crowded that it became a problem. The area got so crowded that no one wanted to go there, and the traffic was so clogged and discouraging. Their solution was a Transportation Management Association, along with a CID.

A Transportation Management Association (TMA) is a voluntary membership association. A BID involves taxes et cetera. A TMA is volunteer based, and a non-profit organization. They had to come up with some flexible and creative mechanisms. They created shuttle services. This has proven to be a very successful solution. They encourage people to park and take a shuttle, which boasts frequency and convenience. If it is frequent enough and convenient enough, they will use it. These associations and districts are successful. Their continued existence is the proof. Their websites are extremely helpful and useful as well.

Prof. Morcol stressed that the process that Lower Paxton is experiencing is not unusual, and this will take patience, leadership and determination. The BID will need to sign up the big players in the area first. If the natural leaders are interested, it gives an impression that it is something viable and instills confidence.

A Transportation Management Association may be something valuable to consider as well. Prof. Morcol also suggested collaborating with other BIDs in the area, such as, Harrisburg, State College and Reading.

Mr. Newsome asked if there are any BID associations in the area. Prof. Morcol stated there is the Pennsylvania Downtown Center. There is also an International Downtown Association in Washington DC. These associations are not just for BIDs, but also for municipalities and cities and even individuals can be members.

The BID management will need to be very good at disseminating information to its members. That is something that does not necessarily take place initially, but it has to be thought about now and prepared for. It should include an explanation of how the District will assess its performance and clearly show what is planned and what is going on. BIDs do report to the DCED for the State, but it needs to report to its businesses to keep them interested and enthusiastic. The Center City District in Philadelphia is the best example of this. They publish their annual report, which shows how they evaluate themselves and is an indispensable tool in public relations.

Mr. Guise asked about strategies to get the buy-in from the businesses. He noted the Township wants to give them a list of what a BID could do for the businesses, but it wants to get their ideas of what they want a BID to do for them. The Township needs to be prepared to offer specifics yet needs to get these businesses' suggestions and needs or wants. He also asked who or what type of businesses should be invited initially, since the small business gets the same vote as a large mall owner.

Prof. Morcol suggested first getting the support of a few key land owners. That could be difficult, especially with the national chain stores. Mr. Guise stated that our shopping centers are owned by a national firm, and have national chain stores in them. He asked who the Township should seek out. Prof. Morcol agreed that is a challenge.

Prof. Morcol recommended putting together a list of what is happening and why the improvements are needed, and show examples, such as Cumberland and Town Center.

In the Cumberland CID, there is a busy intersection of Routes 285, 75, and 85 called the Kennedy Interchange. It is very busy and high volume. The CCID put their own money into the feasibility study and engineering work and planning, and presented it to the State Department of Transportation. The return on their investment was 29:1.

Mr. Guise stated that after talking to Harrisburg's BID Director, and reading about State College, it appears that clean-up is the biggest expense. Prof. Morcol suggested that traffic might be the bigger issue here, and a shuttle or some other traffic improvement could be considered. Beauty and safety/security may be more applicable for a downtown area.

With regard to advertising, Mr. Guise stated that State College has a very nice map and brochure with coupons. Prof. Morcol suggested special events, festivals or special days, centered around a gathering place. Mr. Lighty stated Route 22 doesn't have a place to gather. Ms. Wissler suggested Brightbill Park since it is located behind Colonial Commons. Mr. Lighty stated the idea is to get people to a special event, and then since they are already there, they will shop. Mr. Guise suggested a craft show at a mall or all three malls in the parking lots. An antique car show is another idea. The events held in parking lots have to be held in off-peak shopping times of the year.

Mr. Newsome stated that each end of the proposed Route 22 Business Improvement District is anchored by an interstate interchange, one running east/west, the other north/south. Prof. Morcol stated it is important to emphasize the strengths of the area. Mr. Gingrich stated that Route 22 is not only a destination, but much of the traffic is commuter traffic, they are going through but not stopping to shop. Mr. Grove stated that the problem is that Route 22 was not designed to handle the volume of traffic using it now. The shuttles and the TMA might be very helpful.

Prof. Morcol stated that the Town Center CID had similar issues with the Barrett Parkway. They did not solve the problem entirely, but did improve the situation.

Mr. Lighty stated that anyone who has ever visited Route 22 knows there are traffic problems, so that is the problem that the District wants to remedy. That is the idea to get businesses interested in the project.

Mr. Lighty noted that the issues that Lower Paxton Township has, seem to be the issues the other Districts have been focusing on. Prof. Morcol agreed that Lower Paxton Township is on the right track.

Mr. Lighty asked how the other places actually got people to ride a shuttle, when people around here will drive from one parking space four aisles down to park and walk to the next store. People here do not walk around the strip malls, and indoor malls are dying out. Prof. Morcol stated they advertised it a lot, and made it visible and recognizable. It is also free. Mr. Newsome stated that frequency will have a lot to do with it. Mr. Lighty asked if they stop at each store, and Mr. Newsome stated that some do. Mr. Guise stated that a shuttle that goes to the three shopping centers is not going to be very appealing to the little business. Mr. Newsome stated it could stop at the little ones too. Mr. Grove stated there could be multiple routes.

Mr. Lighty stated that the traffic signals are programmed, but not dynamic. The former Amp company ran fiber optic lines along Route 22 and the Township has access to that and could tie the traffic signals into it. A control point could run the signals based on real time needs not just timers. The beautification comes in at the point where the drivers that have to sit in traffic or wait for lights have something pretty to look at. PennDOT has already done plans for West Hanover Township, so they already know what they would do to beautify one section of the road. If it is their design, they would be less likely to object. Since the roadway is a State road, the Township would need PennDOT's approval. The next step should be to talk to business owners, but that is where the Township has stalled, with deciding between inviting all or some, and if they should give ideas or gather ideas.

Prof. Morcol suggested asking their opinion but also educating them on the process. He suggested a small group, preferably big businesses, but whoever might be influential. Mr. Lighty stated that many of the business owners are not the property owners. Mr. Guise suggested inviting some small owners and office type owners too.

Mr. Guise asked if the Planning Commission has to get approval to move forward from the Board of Supervisors. Mr. Lighty stated they and Mr. Wolfe have given the Planning Commission the go-ahead.

Mr. Newsome stated staff has come up with a list of owners and sizes of the properties. He was amazed at the assessed value. Ms. Lindsey stated that the economic times will make the businesses focus on what it will cost them.

Prof. Morcol asked about tax-exempt or non-profit entities, noting that they are not assessed, but make voluntary contributions. The only ones along the corridor are tenants, not owners, so they would not get a vote. There do not seem to be any churches along the corridor either. There are a small number of residential properties.

Mr. Newsome asked who bought the Toyota dealer. The property seems to still be owned by Hartman even though the franchise has changed hands. Mr. Newsome stated he was impressed with Cal Hartman's work and enthusiasm on the sign ordinance. Watson Fisher asked if the State laws have any hurdles the Township should be particularly aware of. Prof. Morcol stated that the laws allow for the creation of a NIDMA if there is no chamber of commerce. This area does not have a chamber of commerce. The NIDMA would be a non-profit entity. BIDs used to be created as authorities, but now they are not. The Township could still choose to create an authority, but most areas do not want to do that because the NIDMA gives more flexibility. The authorities and powers that were granted in the 1945 law are still in effect.

Prof. Morcol advised that non-profit and residential properties can create a problem if there are too many. Residential properties can be taxed at different rates. When drawing the boundaries, the Commission tried to omit properties that were residential, but there does appear to be about 7 residential properties.

Mr. Lighty asked about Districts that have been established and failed. Prof. Morcol stated there is only one that was shut down: Allentown PA. In the US, there are 500-1,000 Improvement Districts, and the only one that he was aware of that was terminated was Allentown. There could be others, but not many. Mr. Lighty asked what they did wrong. Prof. Morcol stated the mayor didn't like them. Mr. Newsome asked when Allentown had the improvement district. Prof. Morcol stated it was in the late 90's, and there is some interest in trying again. Mr. Lighty stated that one did not succeed because of a lack of success, but for political reasons. He asked how the current state of the economy will affect Lower Paxton Township's efforts. It could be looked at as a help in tough times, or another burden in tough times. Prof. Morcol stated that times are tough, but this will change. He further noted that this is not being created to serve this one current year, nor will it even be set up this year. By the time this is in action, the economy will be different than it is now. He noted that there are always objections even in prosperous times, but that should not discourage the district or the others in the district.

With the absence of projection equipment, Mr. Lighty requested Prof. Morcol to email his presentation to the Commission so they may still look at it, and invited the professor to come to any of the meetings and to follow the progress of the district. Prof. Morcol was happy to come to additional meetings, and asked that if there is any in particular that he can be more useful than others, to bring those to his attention and he will attend if he is in the area.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no additional public comment.

ADJOURNMENT

The next Planning Commission workshop session regarding the Route 22 Improvement District is scheduled for Monday, June 1, 2009, at 5:30 pm, in Room 174 of the Municipal Center. There will be a light meal available at 5:00 pm.

The next regular Planning Commission meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, May 13, 2009, at 7:00 pm at the Lower Paxton Township Municipal Center, Room 171.

Being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 7:00 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

Michelle Hiner
Recording Secretary