

LOWER PAXTON TOWNSHIP
PLANNING COMMISSION
WORKSHOP MEETING

July 21, 2008

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT

Fredrick Lighty
Dennis Guise
William Neff
Douglas Grove
Roy Newsome

ALSO PRESENT

Dianne Moran, Planning & Zoning Officer

CALL TO ORDER

Mr. Lighty called the workshop meeting of the Lower Paxton Township Planning Commission to order at 5:39 pm, on July 21, 2008 in Room 174 of the Lower Paxton Township Municipal Center, 425 Prince Street, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania.

PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE TO THE FLAG

Mr. Grove led the recitation of the Pledge.

ROUTE 22 IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT

General Discussion

The Planning Commission reviewed the printed map showing the parcel lines and boundaries of the Route 22 Improvement District.

Mr. Lighty noted that the District is not contiguous. Ms. Moran stated those properties between the two areas are residential. Mr. Guise stated the statute calls for a map indicating the boundaries..., it is not in the definition that the District must be contiguous, but it does seem to imply it. Mr. Guise suggested those properties be included in the boundary, but those residential properties will not be designated.

Mr. Newsome and others thought it had to be contiguous. He noted the street connects them, so it is linked. Mr. Lighty asked that that portion of Route 22 be colored in to show it as one District.

Mr. Neff suggested dividing the District into 3 phases. The area with the best potential for success could be the initial phase. That may help sell the project. Mr. Lighty stated that every property in the District gets a say, so there cannot be three separate referendums in one district.

Ms. Moran asked how they vote no. Mr. Guise stated that an objection has to be filed with 45 days. If 40% fail to object, the municipality may enact an ordinance creating the district.

Mr. Guise suggested the implementation is the only thing that could be phased. Mr. Newsome stated it would be hard to prioritize the areas. Once the District is created, they are a part of that,

everyone will be assessed at the same time. You have to give them all something from the beginning. Mr. Neff was trying to get away from having to do that. Mr. Grove agreed that physical improvements might be done in phases, but doing only one area when everyone is paying, will create a negative response from everyone else. Mr. Neff explained that he was trying to bifurcate and have one section start paying and improvements start, then the other phases can see the improvements.

Mr. Lighty stated the three items they want to do is advertising, beautification, and traffic improvements, and they are all corridor-wide goals. The beautification may begin at one end or the other, but that will not be done or decided until after the engineering starts. The basis of these goals is district wide, so everyone will benefit.

Mr. Newsome asked about amending the map. Mr. Lighty stated there is a process in the statute for amending the map. Mr. Guise agreed, noting that when we add someone to the map, they get the same 45 days to object. Mr. Newsome asked if that can happen at any time. Mr. Guise agreed that it can, but it is a lengthy process. Mr. Guise suggested that there should be an overall map, plus three zoomed-in maps, each of one-third of the district.

Presentation to the Supervisors

Mr. Lighty volunteered to prepare the presentation, and explained that power-point is a succession of slides, and asked for ideas for the presentation.

Mr. Grove suggested an overall view of the district. Mr. Lighty suggested listing the things the Planning Commission took into consideration. Mr. Newsome suggested a statutory overview, what is it and how it works. Mr. Newsome suggested a list of improvement districts in the region. Mr. Newsome suggested the presentation should be directed at not just the Board, but the public or any other audience as well. He suggested one slide should show that the Board of Supervisors asked the Planning Commission to evaluate the idea, and here is what the PC has come up with. There should be a slide showing the options, little area versus big area. Mr. Newsome stated that the idea started with downtown improvement districts, and the Commission realized that our downtown or main street is Route 22, a lineal corridor. Mr. Neff stated that is when Mr. Seeds' question gets answered as to why not Paxtonia. Mr. Guise added that Linglestown already has improvements underway and they are a village. This area has the most commercial potential given the statutory requirement that the properties included have to be for-profit activities involving trade, traffic, or commerce in general. Mr. Newsome suggested, before the maps, the things that can be accomplished should be discussed. The goals were set, then the boundaries were worked out.

Mr. Guise suggested that in addition to the parcel maps, there should be aerial maps as well, one of the overall project and smaller ones in thirds.

Mr. Newsome suggested that information be provided outlining the process from that point forward.

Mr. Guise suggested showing pictures of other districts and what amenities they have provided to show the benefits that are possible. Mr. Lighty will get a picture of the banners in downtown Harrisburg.

Mr. Neff suggested not using the word advertising, and focus on marketing the district. Advertising may have a negative response. The marketing efforts may list the merchants, but it shouldn't be called advertising.

Mr. Newsome stated that the three goals will help the Township continue to be a destination, so that our customer base doesn't go elsewhere. This idea should go towards the beginning when the presentation talks about why there is an interest in improvement districts. Mr. Guise agreed that the purpose is to promote economic and general welfare in the district and in the municipality. Mr. Newsome suggested that the purpose should be presented, then the goals to help achieve the purpose, then the district will help the municipality achieve the goals. Mr. Guise agreed that it would be more effective, more functional, and provide more opportunity to achieve things that would otherwise be unachievable.

Mr. Guise suggested tying the ideas of the district into the Comprehensive Plan.

Mr. Neff asked if the shopping centers do advertising or banners within their own property, that could be expanded upon. Mr. Grove noted that the Colonial Park Mall doesn't do much advertising, whereas the other malls in the area do.

Mr. Lighty asked what sort of examples could be used in the presentation. Mr. Grove stated that Philadelphia Center City District probably has some things that may be good to look at.

Mr. Guise suggested a picture of each end of the district looking in to illustrate beautification.

Mr. Guise asked about a name for the district. Mr. Lighty stated that the name of the exit off the interstate is Colonial Park, and someone in Mechanicsburg going to the Mall or to Paxton Towne Centre would generalize and say I'm going to Colonial Park. Technically Colonial Park is a defined neighborhood, but the region thinks of the whole area as "Colonial Park". Mr. Newsome preferred to focus on "Lower Paxton". Mr. Guise stated that this district is still conceptual at this point, so a name isn't critical yet, but agreed that branding is very important.

Mr. Lighty suggested a picture of a welcome to sign, such as East Pennsboro Township's signs.

A picture of traffic would be best taken from Long John Silver's looking east, and one looking west.

Mr. Lighty suggested the August 12th meeting is too soon, and the Commission would be better prepared for the September 9th meeting.

Mr. Guise noted that having a briefing of the merchants before having all the answers to all the questions will be dangerous. The preliminary plan has to be established before going public with the ideas. Before the preliminary plan, there is a large amount of work to be done to establish the plan. The Commission needs to get the Supervisor's feedback with the process so far, then get a direction from here.

Mr. Lighty agreed that the Supervisors need to be consulted before going further ahead. Mr. Guise noted the statute includes a list of things that go into the preliminary plan: map, name, detailed description of the service area, list of all properties, list of proposed improvements and estimated costs, a proposed budget for the first fiscal year, a personnel and administration program and maintenance operation expenditures, proposed revenue services, estimated time frame, how its going to be governed, a governance statement.

Mr. Neff felt that it will be important to have support from some key retailers before getting to the preliminary plan. Mr. Lighty didn't want any general public input until the answers to all of the questions are available. He stated that people come to the meeting looking for answers, and if the answers aren't available, there will be problems. Mr. Neff stated that there is a fine line when working with the general public trying to market a development, and there is also a fine line when talking about a program prepared by the government that will help the private sector. It is extremely important to have an informal work session at some point with some selected or invited folks initially, from the large, the medium and the small sized businesses. That will be a forum to ask them what they think the district could do to improve their business. He suggested that the responses may be very different than what the Township thinks. Mr. Neff noted he was a business major, a business manager, and an owner of a newspaper. It is important to talk to the people who will be affected to get their ideas. They may have ideas this group didn't, and they will gain ownership in the project, which will have positive effects. It has to be a partnership if it is going to work.

M. Lighty stated he watched Harrisburg develop their district, as well as Carlisle. Harrisburg had a very clear vision, and explained it to the people that would be affected, and those people overwhelmingly wanted it. Carlisle people leave their meetings saying they are being assessed and don't know what they are getting for it; a clear vision was not laid out for them. Mr. Neff agreed that is key. Mr. Lighty stated that if you ask 200 people for ideas, you'll get at least 100 different answers. Mr. Neff stated the district can be broken down into three categories: large malls, medium businesses like an Olde Liberty Square tenant, and the mom/pop operations, and it is important to listen to all three. Mr. Grove stated that having some voices from peers in each category involved will give the rest of the people in the district a little more security that it isn't just the government coming in and taking their money to do what the government wants with it.

Mr. Neff noted that there is no listing or central gathering of our businesses, to tell a consumer that they don't have to drive to Paxton Street for tires because there are five good places here. Mr. Grove noted that even if they drive it they will miss some.

Mr. Grove suggested it is important to get the ideas of the people, even though there will undoubtedly be some ideas that fall outside the purview of what an improvement district can and should do. An idea may be something that the individual business should do on their own rather than the district for everyone. On the other hand, there are a lot of things the district can do for all of the businesses involved, such as, a directory of the businesses in the district. An advertisement in the Clipper or the newspaper would be an idea that is better done individually.

Mr. Guise cautioned against getting too specific too soon. If a briefing is held, it has to be kept conceptual. When specifics are discussed, there will be ample opportunity for the participants in the district to have input into how things go.

Mr. Lighty stated that the statute lays out an order for the process, including public input, public hearings and public meetings, long before the time of the vote. Mr. Guise agreed the statute gives a clear scenario of the process.

Mr. Lighty stated that there will be three slices in a pie chart, each slice with a certain percentage of the funds. In each slice there will be many details that will be gotten to after the district is created. He noted that an improvement district has a paid director and staff to come up with and implement the details. The policy-setting board selects the three big goals, and the staff works on them. Mr. Neff stated that those statements raise red flags to a merchant, the mention of an executive director and staff is the kind of approach that will set a negative tone. If it appears as though a bureaucracy is being created, that will also be negative. Mr. Guise speculated that 50% of the budget will be personnel. Mr. Lighty stated that Middletown pulled it off with a full time person. Mr. Lighty stated that grants are available as well.

Mr. Newsome noted that much of the discussion is too detailed for the current level of the project. If the district can't get off the ground, these discussions are irrelevant.

Mr. Guise suggested a time line as a closing to the presentation to the Board. Once the district is created, it will create a municipal authority of sorts, which will then be able to apply for grant money. He noted that it is important to make it clear that the assessments are not the only source of funds, and that the executive director will be aggressive in finding that money. Mr. Neff asked about getting a grant to get someone or a consultant. Mr. Grove stated there is grant money available for so many things, that it is a matter of finding it. Mr. Newsome recommended a person be hired to do the administration and get grants and get the district set up and running. Mr. Lighty stated the Township will have to put the seed money up initially. Mr. Lighty stated that Middletown got a grant, and used it to hire the guy, then he ran the programs. Harrisburg set the program up, collected the first assessment, then hired the guy to run it.

Mr. Neff asked if the assessment is tied to the tax bills or if the Township has some other mechanism to gather the assessment. Mr. Lighty stated that the business improvement district itself will send a bill to the participants, not the Township. It is possible to bill the first of the year, or several times a year. Mr. Guise read, "...equal, annual, or more frequent...".

Mr. Neff asked if the Township has the ability to bill. Mr. Guise stated the improvement district has the authority to bill and place liens on property for non-payment. Mr. Neff asked who physically does the work. Mr. Lighty stated it will be entirely separate once it is set up, meaning a Township employee couldn't do that work. It is created and managed by the governing body, but it is a separate entity. Mr. Neff noted that the Township has a payroll system, and asked if that could function to keep the funds separate. Mr. Newsome stated these items are too detailed for this level of the project. Mr. Guise noted that there is a process for assessment, and the Board of Supervisors has to approve the assessments as well. It would be up to the director to decide who physically does the work.

At that point in the presentation the Commission will entertain questions from the Board.

Mr. Lighty will run the presentation, and Mr. Guise will handle the information and questions regarding the statute. When the presentation is ready, Mr. Lighty will send a link to his website to the Commissioners for their review.

OTHER BUSINESS

Paxtonia

Mr. Neff asked about the boundaries of Paxtonia. Mr. Lighty stated it is the area south of Route 22, from where Allentown Boulevard and (old) Jonestown Road split on the west, to Nyes Road on the east, and as far south as Devonshire Heights Road. People typically consider Paxtonia as the area of Paxtonia Gardens and the strip of Jonestown Road. Mr. Neff noted that Paxtonia wouldn't be a better idea because once you take out the Post Office, the churches and the school, there isn't enough to raise sufficient funds for noticeable improvements. Mr. Lighty noted there may be another vehicle that could be used to address the needs of Paxtonia, such as village status. There isn't enough commercial activity in Paxtonia to generate enough to even do sidewalks.

Mr. Newsome stated he saw CAT busses in Paxton Towne Centre, and was pleased.

Cell Towers

Mr. Newsome was concerned that our ordinance regarding cell towers does not call for the removal of the towers when they are not being used. Susquehanna Township's ordinance does. Mr. Neff stated there is no criteria for granting special exceptions. He was interested to know what else is available. Mr. Neff did not want to see a tower go up in an area where there is already homes, or a new development go in near an existing tower and create a visual impact. Economics may be the only reason for picking a residential area over a more appropriate area. There are some on the top of water towers, and other creative locations.

Mr. Newsome was concerned that towers are not required to be removed. Mr. Guise thought that it was included in the ordinance. Mr. Lighty stated it may be difficult to define use of the tower, as equipment is added and removed. Ms. Moran noted that the sign ordinance has provisions for removal of abandoned signs, but it is very difficult to actually get a sign removed, such as the Dutch Pantry sign. The signage is not an element of a land development plan, however, Mr. Neff suggested that should be changed. He also suggested that any grandfathering should be lost when the property is subject to development.

Mr. Newsome stated that some municipalities require bonds for the removal of cell towers when they are no longer in use. He suggested Lower Paxton Township do the same thing.

Mr. Newsome stated that cell towers are an intermediate use for an intermediate technology, and satellites will ultimately be used for communications. When that happens, Mr. Newsome doesn't want to see abandoned cell towers all over the Township, with no way to have them removed.

Mr. Lighty asked how many cell towers are in the Township, and if there is full coverage in the Township. Mr. Newsome suggested that a municipality that is authorizing the towers should have access to that information. That information could tell us how many more towers the Township may be approached with.

Mr. Lighty suggested the one on Queen Avenue is visually unappealing, and asked if there are other towers in the Township that bother nearby residents. Mr. Neff stated the one at the Linglestown Fire Company is obtrusive. There is also one at the driving range that is close to the property of Laurel Ridge. Mr. Neff stated that one is all you see from the windows of several of the units in Laurel Ridge.

Mr. Neff stated that the ordinance supplied by the cell company is so general and so nebulous, compared to Susquehanna Township. Mr. Lighty stated that it is very similar, except for the removal section. Mr. Guise suggested it seems to be much easier to get approval for a tower in Susquehanna Township than in Lower Paxton.

PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no public comment.

ADJOURNMENT

There is a TND Subcommittee meeting scheduled for Wednesday, August 6, 2008 at 3:30 pm.

The next Route 22 Improvement District workshop is scheduled for Monday, August 18, 2008, from 5:30 pm to 7:00 pm. There will be a light dinner available starting at 5:00 pm. The meeting will be held in Room 171.

The next regular Planning Commission meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, August 13, 2008, at 7:00 pm at the Lower Paxton Township Municipal Center, Room 171.

The meeting adjourned at 7:12 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

Michelle Hiner
Recording Secretary