

LOWER PAXTON TOWNSHIP
PLANNING COMMISSION
BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT
WORKSHOP MEETING

November 9, 2009

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT

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

STAFF PRESENT

Lori Wissler, Planning & Zoning Officer

GUESTS PRESENT

Watson Fisher, SWAN Representative
Jack Dietel, Tire Mart
Mary Williams, Colonial Park Mall

Jason Mead, Fulton Bank
Nancy Kennedy & Janice Spengler, Sandwich Man
Cal Hartman, Freedom Toyota

CALL TO ORDER & INTRODUCTION

Mr. Lighty called the meeting of the Lower Paxton Township Planning Commission to order at 6:45 pm, on November 9, 2009 in Room 171 of the Lower Paxton Township Municipal Center, 425 Prince Street, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. Planning Commission members and guests introduced themselves to the group.

ROUTE 22 BUSINESS IMPROVEMENT DISTRICT

Background

Mr. Lighty presented a PowerPoint Presentation about the background, goals and requirements of the proposed Business Improvement District (Copy Attached.)

Mr. Lighty stated that BIDs are not limited to downtown areas. Regarding potential improvements, he stated that traffic management improvements do not equate roadway improvements. Route 22 is a State road, and is controlled by PennDOT, and a change would cost many millions of dollars. However, traffic management is things like timing of the lights, cameras, or a network operations center. The roadway could be managed better, even if physical infrastructure changes are not constructed. There are people who won't come to the area because of the traffic, so this could help that.

Mr. Lighty explained that a BID can do things that a municipal government cannot do with tax money. A BID is similar to a chamber of commerce, it would be local, run by the businesses, set up by the Township and benefiting the area.

Mr. Lighty asked for a discussion about BIDs and for the thoughts of the attendees of tonight's meeting. In tough economic times, is this something a business needs to get an extra edge or is it just one more thing the business has to pay for.

Open Discussion

Cal Hartman stated he is definitely interested in enhancing the area and bringing more people to the corridor. He has been in business there since 1978 and has seen a lot of changes, good and not so good. Serving on the Sign Committee for the Township in the past, he can see both sides. The former Dutch Pantry sign is old and ugly, but remains. He also has an old sign at the former Black & Decker business. The businesses cling to the signage they have because if they remove it, they must comply with the current ordinances, which only allow smaller signs. The signage makes a huge difference for the business.

Mr. Hartman suggested something that unites the corridor would be very nice. The banners or lighting would unify the street would take the attention from the ugly signs or ugly building fronts. Even though the existing clutter would remain, the eye would be drawn to the uniformity.

Mr. Newsome stated that a BID is a mechanism in which the business owners can come together and work towards improvements. This stretch of Route 22 has everything a person could need. It is our downtown.

Mary Williams stated that they are totally over-signed already. She did not think that Route 22 looked like a downtown. In order for anything to be done about the aesthetics, a serious clean-up would have to be done. It would not be worth it to add anything to the road on top of all that is already there. She noted that it seems that adding banners or posts would just add more clutter. She did agree that this is the retail Mecca of Harrisburg. When the Mall spends money, it has to translate to sales. Branding the area as having everything is a good idea.

Mr. Lighty stated that the specifics are not part of this phase of the BID, those things would be worked on after the BID was created and the District would decide what is best for itself. He noted that when there is an element of uniformity, even amongst clutter, the eye is drawn to what is uniform.

Janice Spengler stated she grew up in this area and agreed that the improvements in downtown Harrisburg are beautiful. She asked how that would actually translate to sales. She has experienced the Inner Harbor and Atlanta shopping districts. She agreed that a clean-up of signs is needed, and asked how you talk those people into removing them. Mr. Lighty stated that the law is not on the side of cleaning up. The owner of the sign is entitled to it as long as it remains. Ms. Williams added that a business owner will do what they can to keep it even if it is not the most aesthetically pleasing. Mr. Lighty stated that getting everyone to take down the signs they have and put up smaller nicer ones is just not going to happen.

Mr. Guise stated that marketing is another enhancement the BID can work on. State College has a map of their BID highlighting the businesses. A website is another marketing tool. Marketing may be an area worth more of the BID's consideration because of the challenges associated with beautification.

Mr. Lighty stated that the discussions going on now are the types of things a BID would discuss and strive for. He thought that the general consensus is that a BID is a good idea, but only a matter of what specifically should be done. Mr. Guise added that the BID gets to decide that, not the Planning Commission or the Township. He noted that security during and clean-up after the late Friday and Saturday nights is the biggest expense to the Harrisburg DID. That shows that the priorities and missions vary from district to district. He stated the question is if there is a mission that is worthwhile for the business community to join together and work on.

Ms. Spengler stated that their property is limited in some respects because the parking lot goes all the way to the street. Nancy Kennedy stated this area doesn't have many sidewalks, so people basically drive everywhere. Mr. Guise stated that a trolley could be used to move people around the district. People could drive their car to Tire Mart and be taken to eat or shop elsewhere in the district. Mr. Lighty stated that the Cumberland CID's main focus is traffic and transportation. Ms. Kennedy stated you do not have many places to stop a trolley. Mr. Lighty stated that the CAT buses simply stop in the traffic lane.

Ms. Williams asked how the municipality or improvement district can make changes to the traffic signals on a state-owned roadway. Mr. Lighty stated that the district would have to work with PennDOT. He emphasized that a BID has a much stronger voice than a couple of businesses. It even has more impact when the municipality and the BID go to PennDOT together. Ms. Williams asked how the control of the lights will be different with a management system in place from what the Township can already do to the lights. Mr. Lighty stated that the signals are set up on a basic system. When one light backs up the next three lights, the ability to adjust it doesn't exist. If there were a way to see that situation and adjust one light 10 seconds it could alleviate the back-log. The traffic signals are synchronized, but are also equipped with emergency interrupts to allow emergency vehicles to get through. When that is triggered, it takes a very long time to reset. Mr. Newsome suggested putting double lines at the left-turn into the Bon-Ton to prevent vehicles from blocking the entrance. It wouldn't physically prevent it, but it could be signed accordingly. PennDOT would probably have to approve something like that. Ms. Williams agreed that would be a great idea.

Mr. Hartman stated that it comes down to money. There is no way to get rid of the signs. He suggested taking a look at what is at the curb to see what could be used to get some uniformity.

With respect to the comments about "we've got it all", Mr. Hartman stated that he has been in the area for 30 years and does not know half of what is along that area. Ms. Lindsey stated there are 233 parcels along the selected corridor. Mr. Hartman stated that if they were advertised collectively, they may even be able to piggy-back off each other.

Mr. Newsome stated that a map, guide or index of the businesses in the corridor could be hugely beneficial.

Jason Mead stated that the purpose of the meeting is to decide if this is something that the businesses want to do or would be supportive of. He noted that the area of his bank has an industrial feel with large parking lots along the fronts and is not visually friendly. He liked the idea of more grass or light fixtures. He noted that he lives in Hummelstown which has done street lights, signs, flowers, similar to Hershey and the coastal towns. Hummelstown has a map of its businesses. His wife has a business which is part of that, but she has not seen much business generated from it. He suggested a map may not be effective in this area. He noted that it would be important to know how far in either direction the district would go. Mr. Lighty stated that the Planning Commission did come up with a proposal that maps the area from the A-Plus gas station and diner to Harley.

Mr. Hartman stated that the businesses on the west side of Interstate 83 have declined, and our area could be there in a few years. A district, maybe among other things, should be considered.

Mr. Lighty stated that a BID sunsets in five years, at which time a vote is taken whether to continue. In Harrisburg City, enough of the businesses liked it enough to vote for it to continue. There are even businesses nearby that have asked that it be expanded to include them.

Funding & Assessments

Mr. Lighty stated that the BID is funded by an assessment. The greatest it is allowed to be by law is 1.5 mils. At that amount, it would generate \$372,329 annually. If the money were divided into thirds, how much advertising would \$100,000 buy? Ms. Williams stated that the mall itself doesn't spend much, but the anchor stores spend well over that amount on advertising. Mr. Grove stated that the cow parade may not have generated much revenue, but it certainly drew attention to the area, and gathered a lot of press coverage, which is free advertising.

Mr. Hartman suggested hanging banners or flags that could be changed seasonally. They don't have to be every ten feet, but one or two in a block would be enough. They would also be a one time expense, not every year.

Mr. Lighty stated that the cow parade was initiated by the Harrisburg DID, and they are currently working on a project with painting fire hydrants.

Mr. Lighty stated that the \$372,000 is an annual income, and the BID could save up for something bigger. Mr. Guise stated that another important function of a BID is to apply for grant money. The BIDs the Planning Commission looked at did a lot with grant money.

Mr. Hartman stated that a newsletter or some publication that is done on a regular basis could include articles of interest.

Mr. Mead asked how many businesses were invited to the meeting. Five of twenty businesses are in attendance. Mr. Guise noted this is the second such meeting. Mr. Newsome stated they

selectively chose businesses to invite to get their opinion. They tried to get representation from a variety of businesses. Mr. Mead volunteered to be on any committee or help wherever he is needed.

Mr. Lighty stated that he hears mostly positive responses, and the Planning Commission can go on to the next step. Ms. Lindsey noted that the previous meeting resulted in the same general feel. Mr. Lighty stated that if the attendees do like the idea, it would be beneficial to spread the information to their neighbors.

Ms. Spengler suggested bike lanes. Ms. Wissler stated that they were included in the Walnut Street Corridor Study, but if that comes to fruition, it will be a long time into the future.

Ms. Williams would like to see something on paper to better understand the proposals. Mr. Guise stated there really won't be something like that until long after the district is created. The preliminary plan would include concepts, but not details.

Ms. Spengler asked if the district would include hiring someone. Mr. Newsome stated the district would have to decide those things. The Township will utilize its staff to get the preliminary plan done, but once it is created, it would have its own staff person.

Mr. Lighty stated that there are several public hearings required, but there will also be additional meetings keeping the businesses involved and informed.

Ms. Williams asked about a dollar figure for the assessment. The figures are achieved by multiplying the assessed value of the property by 0.0015.

Mr. Hartman raised a concern that many properties are leased, and the lease agreements probably do not allow for additional assessments so the owner may not be able to pass the cost onto its tenant. Many such leases are long term. A property owner may not be excited to pay into marketing for its lessee. He asked if there is a way to assess the businesses along the corridor, not necessarily the property owner.

The invitations for this meeting were sent to the legal property owners, but they were also sent to the sites if they were not the owners.

Mr. Lighty stated that the assessment is levied against the property owner. If the owner has no means of collecting that from its tenant, it may pose a problem. The district would ultimately create a nicer more valuable place, which does benefit the owner by retaining a thriving tenant.

Mr. Guise stated that a BID can be terminated by petition of at least 40% of its members.

Mr. Newsome stated the assessment issue is valid, and needs to be looked into. He noted that Lower Paxton Township is not unique in that aspect, so he would like to see how the other districts handle it. Mr. Hartman asked if it is legal to assess the business. Mr. Lighty stated that the law says the

property owner is assessed. Mr. Hartman suggested there are very few lease agreements that include a provision for increasing the rent to cover additional assessments.

Ms. Kennedy asked about the salary for the staff person(s) for the district. Mr. Guise stated that it is part of the district's budget. Mr. Lighty stated that many districts tie their executive director's salary to how much money they can raise through grants, donations and contributions.

ADJOURNMENT

The next regular Planning Commission meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, December 9, 2009, at 7:00 pm at the Lower Paxton Township Municipal Center, Room 171.

Being no further business, the meeting adjourned at 8:01 pm.

Respectfully Submitted,

Michelle Hiner
Recording Secretary