

LAWRENCE TOWNSHIP GROWTH & REDEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE
Tuesday, April 10, 2018

The following are the minutes of the Growth & Redevelopment Committee meeting, which was held on Tuesday, March 13, 2018 at 6:40 p.m. in the Lawrence Township Municipal Building, Lower Level Conference Room.

Statement of Adequate Notice:

Adequate notice of the regular meeting of the Lawrence Township Growth & Redevelopment Committee has been provided by filing an annual meeting schedule with the Municipal Clerk and by filing the agenda with the Municipal Clerk, posting prominently in the Municipal Building and mailing to the Trenton Times and the Trentonian.

Roll Call:

Present: Frank Comstock
Lovette Love-Stevens
Charles Lavine
John Conroy
Robert Pluta
Teresita Bastides-Heron
Peter Ferrone
Brian Vaughn
Nina Reeder
Andrew Frank
Christopher LaFlamme

Absent: None

Excused Absence: Tushar Patel
Joan Brame
Maria Connolly
Melissa Clark

Also Present: Christopher Bobbitt, Council Liaison
Andrew Link, Liaison
Susan Snook, Secretary

Welcome New Member:

The Committee introduced themselves to the new member, Christopher LaFlamme.

Ms. Bastides-Heron asked how many members received the Lawrence Ledger. The Committee members stated they are not by a subscription, but thrown in driveways.

Minutes:

The March 13, 2018 minutes was unanimously approved with a minor change in the second paragraph on Page 2.

Pastor Reeder stated she did not receive the minutes or the agenda for this meeting.

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Public Comment:

None

Securing Awards Program Sponsors and A Speakers:

Chairperson Conroy stated we are officially confirmed for the October 10, 2018 and might be held across the street at the Old Greenacres, which is now Cobblestone. The Chamber will be verifying that after the success or none success of its use as a venue for the Mayor's speech. It has been held there before with great success and several years since we had it there.

We still need to secure sponsors and Chairperson Conroy asked how many committee members sent out requests from local businesses for sponsors. He stated he had send out four to Mrs. G's, Quaker Bridge Mall, MDNJ and Investors Bank. Mr. Link had sent out some verbiage and if it needs to be resent please advise. It is \$300 if they secure it before June and \$325 after June. They will be placed in the Awards Program as a sponsor and actually get a minute to speak during the awards, which will have 75 to 100 local businesses in Town which means you get to promote your business. We have seven or eight awards, we actually promote 14 businesses in Town (people receiving and people sponsoring the award). It is a morning event and Chairperson Conroy would like to see everybody here to send it to at least two people to try to get sponsorships.

Mr. Link asked if Chairperson Conroy was going to coordinate that so people do not get contacted twice. Chairperson Conroy suggested that we start a list and we will have to figure out a way to post the list and he suggested giving the list to Mr. Link and he can keep it running. Mr. Ferrone stated it has to be done before we reach out to people. Chairperson Conroy stated we will keep a running list of the awards and who is sponsoring them, in the verbiage it stated first come first serve, so what we are looking for is that when one of the spots are filled, we will let the committee know and it will be removed from the list.

Ms. Bastides-Heron stated what would happen if two people send it to the same business, how will we solve that. Chairperson Conroy stated we will take our e-mail list and reply to all and that I am contacting this person.

It was opened to the floor about speakers. The committee members suggested the following: Rachel Stark; Investors Bank; our Mayor; the new owner of the Lawrence Shopping Center. Chairperson Conroy stated we try to get some business person in Town and last year is was Mr. Nerwinski because he was the new Township Manager. Mayor Bobbitt stated they are based out of Brooklyn and it would be worth reaching out to because everyone in the community wants to know what is going on. He continued that they have Cooper Pest where retro fitness was and they are going to do renovations of the exterior. He stated he will reach out about the speaker.

Mayor Bobbitt stated Main Street is looking for an executive director and Mr. Frank stated since his wife is the president they should have someone in a week or two. Mayor Bobbitt stated that Lawrenceville Main Street is doing a lot of things on Main Street; he also suggested Bristol-Myers Squibb. It was also suggested about Lawrenceville School. It was also suggested Brandywine because the hotel is getting built over there and they will be building some housing that is going to have an affordable component to it off of Lenox Drive.

Chairperson Conroy will reach out to the George Sowa who used to be with Brandywine and he might know who to contact there. Mayor Bobbitt was going to reach out to Mr. Nerwinski and Mr. Parvesse and figure it out from there and see who our current contact is. Mayor Bobbitt suggested that Chairperson Conroy reach out to Brandywine and then let him know. So we will reach out to Brandywine, Lawrence Shopping Center and Bristol-Myers Squibb.

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Signage:

Ms. Connolly was not at the meeting and she is in charge of signage; therefore this item was not discussed. Chairperson Conroy stated we were trying to get the A-frame signs beyond Main Street, in general terms.

Lawrence Shopping Center – Visioning:

Chairperson Conroy stated ideas were suggested at the last meeting to stimulate conversation and he received emails and phone calls from different people. He also met with the Greenway Committee, Environmental Resources Sustainability Green Advisory Committee and Open Space and everybody was proactive of thinking about a more global planning of the area. This is to help generate discussion and nothing is set in stone, no one is saying this is what should be or what will be and we will take it from there.

Chairperson Conroy took our discussions from the last meeting and put together another presentation of the Lawrence Shopping Center. However, before he continued he presented a "Who Am I" presentation to tell the committee who and what he did and does. He also showed in the presentation jobs that he worked on.

Chairperson Conroy stated he prepared a presentation and we can add or delete from this list. The idea behind the planning is a vision we are starting to put together to engage community and discussion of proper development in the district and encourage Township Officials to support and engage in the community discussions on redevelopment; help Town Council understand the importance of getting the Town involved as a hands on approach; engage the commercial properties and owners on the redevelopment and a clear planning for the area so they can understand that when they bring proposals to us and if it does not fit into the plan or can they look at it and enhance on the plan; learn the value of investing in proper planning and consulting that will lead to proper development and ratable in Town. If you have a plan in place that you can you generate a successful development.

From the comments that we had at the last meeting and the things that we showed we thought there was some need of community center in the area; pedestrian connection needed from Lawrence Plaza to the Shopping Center; a pocket park behind Harding and the Shopping Center was discussed that it seems to be a place that the residence use but it is under developed. So Chairperson Conroy took those ideas and put them into the model that was being explored with. Chairperson Conroy presented the model.

One of the first comments made was that it would be great if there was a community center and Mayor Bobbitt stated we do have one; Chairperson Conroy stated in the neighborhood and could be some type of YMCA or gym or a multifunction space and possibly turning the furniture store into that as a possibility. There was a discussion about having a real transportation hub in the area so you did not feel like you were a second class citizen taking public transportation.

He put the hotel on the other side and if it does not pan out this could be a mixed use retail space. To refresh and put people up to speed the other things that were mentioned was to connect the neighborhoods together with the Shopping Center with a walkable fashion to make it a more pedestrian friendly atmosphere. Also the idea of extending neighborhoods along Texas Avenue of extending the fabric of the residential neighborhood giving a more residential street front then looking at the back side of the Shopping Center. Also with some duplex housing and keeping it as a moderate income housing bracket because that is the income bracket that lives in the area and we want to not push those people out and try to help them stay and grow that type of community, so a pocket along Princeton Pike with some multi-family housing in the back as a mixture of moderate and low income housing.

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This is a diagram and still needs development and further research. The other idea was along the Shabunkunk make that Greenacres Land to create a park and pathway to connect multi neighborhoods together. It was also mentioned to take the piece of property that the Shopping Center owns, the jug-handle and turning that into a round-a-bout with a pedestrian connection so the Colonial Lake neighborhood have easy access by walking or bike to go to the Shopping Center.

It was also discussed about creating a public spaces and a public event for music, like Music in the Park in the Main Street area and the GEPNA area. The other item discussed what the activity towards with Lawrence Plaza and trying to give them an easier way of getting to the Shopping Center and back. A discussion of the back area could be a more formalized park with a rain garden; add a vegetable garden plot like north Lawrence. So the ideas from the last meeting was incorporated into the plan for discussion.

Chairperson Conroy opened it up to public comment. Paul Larson, Chairperson of Trails and Open Space was present. Chairperson Conroy stated he met with the committee to start to generate a conversation and what the community might think is important. If we can try to get more input from the Committee and we could talk to Town Council about this and to make something like this work it is going to be a bargaining between the property owners that we are looking at and the Town. If we start to look at it in such a way that there is some sizeable investments that would be made to do this and there has to be some kind of business plan or some incentive for the owners to come in and do this, that the fact is there a way to start shedding some of this land and implementating these housing areas and those owners get to develop it and following a vision or a plan or they can sell it off and take that money and invest it into the shopping center.

One of the things to look at there is to create the kind of activity we are looking at is for the shopping center to give up some retail space, so is there a tax credit for doing that, is there a tax credit for donating some space to Greenway area and maybe donate the land and get a tax write off, but they commit to a long term funding of helping maintain it. Mr. Frank stated how do we make it happen and what do we have to give the property owner and who else can we bring into play and bring in resources and not even sure what the process is for something like this; but there is no formal process and not losing any current commercial property. It was stated it is the walkways where cutting through the retail buildings. Mr. Frank also commented about the renovation they will be doing, façade to make more attractive and how much tax space can the Town lose with something like this.

Mayor Bobbitt answered zero and hesitates to lose ratables and especially with a tax increase this year. This has to be something with a value and all the different stake holders and how to make something visionary happen. It is always a challenge because you have the owners of the shopping center, you have the people south of the Shabakunk; you have people who live off of Texas and people off of Princeton Pike and all those different groups and how to convenience people that all of sudden this shopping center is going to intensify in use and a lot of people don't like change. He continued that the connections are lacking and the transportation hub where the New Jersey Transit spoke about using Route 1 the rapid bus idea of using Route 1 as the secondary corridor where it would be a bus with limited stops and go up and down Route 1 and tie it into that, but if that did not happen it would stay as a bubble. So at the end of the day, you have to convenience the current owners about moving forward and them expanding it. One thing he did comment about is that he likes the fact that Chairperson Conroy went and talked to Open Space and Trails and Environmental Resources because one of things that we have been lacking is the not talking among one another, where they would have a great idea but it does not get to the Planning Board because they do the Land Use Ordinance and it is just talk. Mayor Bobbitt does not want to stop anything and so how do you keep the momentum.

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Chairperson Conroy responded that it is not very detailed because once it gets very detailed it is harder to change it and try to create more conversation about it with the committees and with the general neighborhood and then trying to get the idea that Town will support the dialogue of this, not necessarily the total plan, but the idea of trying to help the vision. Mayor Bobbitt does not quite understand the sort of driver that is pushing us to end up with this form because it is a lot of stuff. He gets the trails but when you take away Wells Fargo that is move where the property owner states why take it away. Chairperson Conroy stated nothing is set in stone and if the dialogue goes where it is important to save the bank or relocate it because it is a long standing member of the shopping Center, so be it.

Mayor Bobbitt commented that it has no give backs that this is something the property owners can figure out a way to make it happen. That might involve them selling off portions and have it being bought with Open Space money. Mayor Bobbitt explained the Affordable Housing plan and how it has not been approved yet and we are looking into places for affordable housing that are not zoned for residential. There are places out there that look like business business and business, but having a mixture of uses on it. Mr. Ferrone asked what is the owner's vision and has anybody had an open dialogue or did we reach out to them and say we have plan and will let you know what it is. Mayor Bobbitt stated talking to the Township Manager, they are in it to renovate it as a shopping center because that is what they do and that is the understanding on where they are coming from. They are focused on only doing a shopping center. Mayor Bobbitt also stated the next time they come down to talk about the renovations to have him involved to ask about these kind of things.

The committee spoke about how people are walking much more now and looking for walking suburban communities, like Princeton being so popular. Pastor Reeder asked do you make the shopping center look fancy and hope somebody will rent and there are not enough businesses there. Mr. Vaughn stated you have to put businesses that people are attracted to. Mr. LaFlamme stated like the location Chipotle is, it is a small shopping center, but it creates foot traffic. The biggest problem here is the disconnect of the sides of Route 1, there are two strips along Route 1 that are dead zones for businesses, they come in and they are out quick and the biggest problem is there is no connectivity.

Pastor Reeder is concerned about the additional housing because of the pressure on the schools. Children are being bused in the Lawrence Intermediate School because there is not enough room in the other schools. They spoke about the traffic being terrible in certain areas like Texas Avenue and Route 1 and Franklin Corner Road. If they put in housing, there will be more families and if you get a bus hub that takes you to the train station every 20 minutes, you will different types of varieties of families. Mr. Vaughn stated we need businesses that are going to attract people to go to local areas and need a draw like places that enable them to use computers.

Mr. LaFlamme stated there is no restaurant with a bar. Mayor Bobbitt stated there is a law where a small scale restaurant under 7,000 sf to serve both beer and wine at the table and not have a bar, but that is in the future. One of the pressure is there is so much money around Quaker Bridge and Mercer Mall and over time you have Joe Canal's and Cheesecake Factory and when they purchased their liquor license from them, that was basically his retirement. This conversation goes back to one of the things he thinks about with the plan if you don't have some guiding principals at the beginning or its about connectivity, it's about various ways of getting through pedestrians, car, then it does not matter about what uses are there. You know how it looks now and taking that exterior piece and upgrading to make it look a little bit more contemporary. They are starting to get businesses back in it to make it viable again.

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Pastor Reeder stated there is a Facebook Page called the Ladies of Lawrenceville and it is a constant topic of how close I came to death today at the new round-about and the Committee spoke about the problems with the new round-about at Route 1 and Whitehead Road. Chairperson Conroy stated if you have two in a row, it makes people slow down. Mayor Bobbitt stated the strength of this idea is going to come from Growth and Redevelopment and working with Open Space and Trails and others to then be able to present to the Planning Board about why this makes sense.

Paul Larson, Chair of Trails and Open Space Advisory Committee said it is important to talk about a concept like this because he looked at the whole area, both sides of the creek, both sides of Route 1, both sides of Princeton Pike, example from the bowling alley down to Hopatcong Drive half the buildings are empty right now; half the shopping center is vacant and no matter which way you look at it, there is no way without a car you can get to the Shopping Center. There are no sidewalks or trails, but it is important talking about this because we do have the opportunity here to come up with something new that the community will actually benefit from. You also have New Jersey Department of Transportation who is planning on replacing the bridge across the Shabakunk in the next couple of years, it is at least two seasons of interruption. The Township has owned some park land since the 1960's and never done anything with it so they own Colonial Lake and the Shopping Center owns pieces of land and with the creek setback regulations, they can't do anything with it right now. If you want to connect in, if you cross at the bridge, the sidewalk shoots off at an angle to the middle of the drive thru at the bank and makes no sense because it goes nowhere. The Township owns several parks in the area to Princeton Pike and goes to Route 206, opposite Notre Dame High School so there is a way to connect the whole south side of the communities together. But now is the time to be thinking of a bigger picture, if not New Jersey Department of Transportation will build a bridge there that does no good other than to move cars from one side to the other without taking in account pedestrians and bicyclists. One challenge is trying to develop any businesses there is to get people across Route 1 and maybe another circle at the end of Texas Avenue.

Chairperson Conroy spoke about a series of pedestrian linkages. Mr. Ferrone stated you need to have a destination store, a restaurant, a bar to where they are going to go. The key is for any shopping center you need a location for a destination store that they are going to go to that is not available to Princeton or Quaker Bridge Mall, it has to be unique to that area, so it comes down to getting the right stores in there. Mr. LaFlamme commented that the shopping centers that expand quickly will have a destination point; it does not have to be something unique, something like a StarBucks that will bring in the professional people that need Wi-Fi for the day, something like Panera, which would drive in foot traffic. Pastor Reeder stated it would drive someone to go there for a descent grocery store.

Ms. Bastides-Heron stated the two anchor stores that are in the shopping center need to go; different anchor stores are needed. Pastor Reeder stated this needs to be a neighborhood destination and not going to be some place that people in East Windsor came to shop. It is also not safe and maybe doing some of these things bringing more people there would make it safer. Pastor Reeder asked what do we do next so we don't do this again, do we say are in favor of something. Chairperson Conroy stated he will send out the revised images. He did not get any comments from the committee and wants to make this our plan and not his plan. He would like to see more suggestions that can be added into the plan and the next thing is to talk to Mayor Bobbitt and to try and get Council behind this. Once they support it then you go to the shopping center and say this is what the community is looking for and Council is backing it, we would like to try and help you do this and how can we help. We want to bring business to your center.

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Mr. Comstock stated in the role of a reporter he interviewed the Mayor and the Manager and both of them have said we are talking about things but we can't talk to you about them, which is fine, because they do not want it in the newspaper. Are we so new in the process that we are not talking to Council yet, because they may already be doing something and that was months ago. Chairperson Conroy stated they are working in their own little bubble and we have to say here are some ideas we have, because they are just talking and we have some pen to paper and that will get a discussion. Mr. Frank asked at what point we need to meet with the shopping center owners. Chairperson Conroy stated the first thing is to get some support from the Town and if we have support from the Town, and if the shopping center owners see the support, and show them it will be an easy process, a light bulb will turn on.

Mr. Ferrone suggested that we should try and get all the persons involved in one room to discuss this. Chairperson Conroy stated it is just starting to happen. Chairperson Conroy stated a number of three million to do the façade upgrade and is not going to go very far. Chairperson Conroy stated we should meet them within the next several months with the Greenway and Open Space Committee to start a dialogue.

Other Business:

None

Adjournment:

There being no further business to come before the Board, the meeting was adjourned at 8:30 p.m.

Digital audio file of this meeting is available upon request.

Respectfully submitted,


Susan J. Snook
Recording Secretary

Minutes approved: May 8, 2018