

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF
THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE MERION CIVIC ASSOCIATION
November 24, 2015

The regular October meeting of the Board of Directors of the Merion Civic Association was held on Tuesday, November 24, 2015, beginning at 7:30 p.m. at the Merion Tribute House with President Michael Seiden presiding.

Directors present were Feuer, Gordon, Greenberg, Hill, Lam, Lavoritano, Murphy, Potok, Quinn, Ross, Rutzel, Seiden and Sinai.

Directors absent and excused were Anderson, Eisenberg, Ettelson, and Marmon.

Merion residents David Magerman, Lyne Raymond and Karla Moras were also in attendance.

The meeting was called to order at 7:40 p.m. by President Seiden, who first welcomed all present.

Approval of Minutes

A motion was made and seconded to approve the 102nd Annual Meeting minutes as well as the October 27 Board meeting minutes. Both were approved unanimously with no discussion.

Treasurer's Report – Bob Marmon prepared the October Treasurer's report and it was presented by Dave Rutzel. A motion was made and seconded and the Treasurer's Report was approved unanimously.

President's Report:

President Seiden reported that public hearing meetings of the Comprehensive Plan occurred on October 28th and November 16th, and that the next scheduled meeting will take place on December 2. President Seiden attended the earlier meetings and noted that the Commissioners are agreeing to institutional demands despite the negative reaction in the community to their decisions. On December 2nd, Mr. Greenfield, the attorney representing both the Merion Community Coalition and the Federation of Civic Associations will be presenting a letter to them reflecting the community viewpoint to the Commissioners on the topic of institutional power. For those who cannot attend the public meetings, they may access them streamed online. The Infrastructure and Facilities presentation to the Commissioners was effectively dismissed and Mr. Seiden, a member of that Committee, suggested to the Commissioners that they pay more attention to the report, as much time and effort was spent in writing the report, and not to dismiss it so precipitously. Karla Moras stated that the Commissioners reacted similarly to recommendations made by the Historic Preservation Committee. Commissioner Rosenzweig recommended weakening the language of both the Historic Preservation and Institutional recommendations. Carl Watson presented a letter from the Federation of Civic Associations opposing changes to the language.

Director Todd Sinai requested to know how the Merion Civic Association plans to react to and participate in the Comprehensive Plan process. Will there be an effort to encourage community attendance; will there be public comment on revisions, recommendations, historic preservation, the expansion of educational institutions beyond their original footprint and the increasing commercialization of institutions? President Seiden responded that if Merion Civic Directors

want to participate they can attend meetings and speak up, and that he would present the opinions of the Merion Civic at the upcoming Commissioner public meetings. In the past, several Directors were members of various Comprehensive Plan committees.

Karla Moras reminded the audience that the next hearing is scheduled for December 2, and asked if the Merion Civic Association will take a position on the “watering down” of the wording of the Executive Summary, thereby reducing the strength of historic preservation and the power of the institutions. Ms. Moras added that the 82 page Executive Summary of the Comprehensive Plan contains draft recommendations and strategies regarding the use of institutions, commercial activity of those institutions, and historic preservation. The Commissioners have reacted to the summary and recommend softening the wording which in effect would approve institutional requests.

To offer some background on the issue, there is an attempt by the Commissioners to weaken the power of the Executive Summary as regards institutional land use by changing the wording, and therefore, its meaning and implementation. Karla Moras reported that at the October 28th public hearing meeting, Commissioner Rosenzweig asked for the word “Discourage” to be struck. Commissioner Bernheim suggested that it be replaced with “manage external impacts of.” The original wording of Recommendation LI6 is:

“Discourage the commercialization of institutional properties by developing policies and specific requirements to establish reasonable use of institutional facilities and place appropriate limits, to address the increasing demand for outside uses which include accessory camps.”

Director Sinai proposed that the Merion Civic Association present a resolution reflecting its opposition to the change in wording at the meeting on December 2. Such a statement should include:

1. the Merion Civic’s view on how institutions should be treated, insisting that they not deviate from their educational aims, and
2. keep the Comprehensive Plan as written and oppose the suggested amendments to the wording of the Plan, which distort the will of the community residents.

Mr. Sinai volunteered to write a draft resolution to be read at the December 2nd meeting by President Seiden. Such a resolution, added to that of the Federation of Civic Associations will demonstrate that the community does care about the effects of Commissioner decisions and will be on record as having stated such. After the resolution is finalized it will be circulated to the Directors by email for their final approval. A motion was made and seconded that the resolution be written and presented. The motion was approved unanimously.

David Magerman of the Kohelet Foundation, who provided funding for the renovations and construction at the Kohelet High School defended the not-for-profit summer camps held on campus as activities designed to offer summer employment to Kohelet teachers. He added that he would welcome a discussion of any issues regarding the school, at any time.

Director Ross, a member of the Planning Commission, stated that most Commissioners are lawyers and have their own areas of expertise as well as biases. His concern is that zoning will be written in favor of the Township and not the residents’ wishes.

Committee/Representative Reports:

Land Use, Zoning and Community Relations: Les Greenberg stated that the Land Development Plan section of the Comprehensive Plan is crucial to the direction the Township takes in rewriting the zoning code for future development. The Planning Commission wrote a letter to the Commissioners urging approval of the Comprehensive Plan as written.

Director Sinai stated that zoning outlines the uses allowed by institutions and that expanding use to include commercial activities is not fair to the residential neighbors who did not anticipate this kind of usage when they bought their properties.

Traffic engineers representing Kohelet will present their study at the January 7th meeting of the Zoning Hearing Board, to be followed by the presentation of the engineers hired by residents on Melrose Avenue.

Director Sinai reported on his meeting with Commissioner George Manos regarding the Bala Village re-zoning. The Commissioners passed re-zoning codes last summer, with very little public input to exclude the School District talks about finding school bus parking lots along Bala Avenue. The code affects Bala Avenue from the BMW dealership on the corner of Montgomery Avenue to City Avenue and from Bala Avenue to Orchard along City Avenue. The zoning pushes buildings to the front of their parcels, with parking in the back, all of which changes the size and scale as an incentive to include retail space, with apartments above storefronts. The Township is vague about how much development they are thinking about. Commissioner Manos has proposed 3-story buildings along the 2 blocks of City Avenue which are in Merion; 4 stories to Bryn Mawr Avenue; and 6 stories to Bala Avenue. Terrence Foley, of the City Avenue Redevelopment District, wants 6 stories along all blocks and threatened legal action against anyone trying to stop that development. Ms. Moras reminded all that the original intent of zoning for low buildings was to insure that the homes on Stoneway Lane would not be deprived of sunlight.

Commissioner's Report: Commissioner Gordon reported Terry Foley of the City Avenue Special Services District threatened legal action against private property owners, but subsequently backed off that action in a meeting with Commissioner Gordon. Commissioner George Manos has suggested eliminating the floor/ratio formula in planning the City Avenue development.

Karla Moras spoke about the dense traffic conditions on City Avenue implicated by the new development along City Avenue, giving as an example that travel time at around 5:30-6:30 p.m. from Old Lancaster Avenue to Berwick Road is about 30 minutes.

Director Sinai stated that the Township does not have a system for predicting the effects of its zoning, such as considering traffic impact.

Commissioner Gordon announced that the Planning Commission meeting on December 3rd will consider the proposed apartment development in the shopping center on St. Asaph's Road in Bala Cynwyd.

Commissioner Gordon reported that at his third meeting with Mark Reed, President of St. Joseph's University, he presented the Civic's and the neighbors' perception of the changes that have occurred in the neighborhood as a consequence of University policies. Among those issues was the on-street parking on Raynham Road; trash along the roads, the annual track race through the neighborhood. He urged the preservation of the character and quality of life

that until recent years was unchanged and unchallenged by the institutions within the community. Commissioner Gordon requested conformity to Zoning Hearing Board Decision 4191. The document delineates the markers for defining the relationship between the institution and the neighborhood, forbidding such things as outside P.A. systems. Joan Chrestay rebutted that St. Joe's feels the University never gets credit for any of the positive moves it makes to compromise with the neighbors.

Commissioner Gordon spoke about the Township budget, 65% of which is allocated to labor costs, which increase each year. Despite the increases there will be no budget increase this year, however, taxes will start to rise in the coming years to pay for the annual increases. Sixteen percent of the budget is allocated to paying down the debt, and Commissioner Gordon feels that in those years when there was no tax increase, the Township should have been paying down the debt.

Regarding the property at the corner of City Avenue and Merion Road, across the bridge from the Overbrook train station, Sunoco proposed selling it to the Township for \$50,000. Remediation on this C3 zoned property has been completed and Sunoco would like the Township to exercise its option to purchase the lot, otherwise it will look for another buyer. Commissioner Gordon proposed that the Township should buy it for open space, or buy and clean up to sell to a prospective home builder. Director Ross suggested that Sunoco be approached with a request to donate outright the lot to Merion.

Funds have been allocated to Merion for a traffic study to consider the idea of three traffic lanes on Montgomery Avenue in Bala Cynwyd.

Regarding race relations in the Township, Commissioner Gordon spoke about recent incidents in which the African-American residents feel they are being profiled. The issues have lead to reforms within the Lower Merion Police Department including race relations training, walking the beat, improving and intensifying positive community relations.

Old Business – None

New Business – None

There being no further new business, a motion was made and seconded and the meeting was adjourned at 10 p.m. The next meeting of the Board of Directors will be held at the Merion Tribute House on Tuesday, January 26 at 7:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Helen Guy, Secretary