

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF
THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF THE MERION CIVIC ASSOCIATION
SEPTEMBER 10, 2015

The regular September meeting of the Board of Directors of the Merion Civic Association was held on Thursday, September 10, 2015, in accommodation of the holidays, beginning at 7:30 p.m. at the Merion Tribute House with President Michael Seiden presiding.

Directors present were Anderson, Gordon, Greenberg, Hill, Lam, Lavoritano, Marmon, Ross, Rutzel and Seiden.

Directors absent and excused were Eisenberg, Feuer, Kalner, Ettelson, Flaks, Murphy, Potok, Quinn, and Sinai.

Merion residents Roz Seiden, Melanie Schafmeister, Ruth Stein, Karla Moras, Barbara Sylk, Shelley Gornish, Sue Schwartz, Marian Levine, Devorah Zauderer, Jean Schmuhl, Tom Schmuhl, Emil Fish, Susan Guthrie, Seth Zwillenberg, president of the Lower Merion Synagogue, Rene Rubin, and Francie McComb of Bala Cynwyd were also in attendance.

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

Speaker – The scheduled speaker, Holly Cohen, Executive Director of the Kohelet Foundation, was invited to return to the Merion Civic Association meeting to further discuss plans for enlarging the Kohelet High School and, and she brought copies of architectural plans which were distributed for review.

Ms. Cohen began her presentation by explaining that the plans have changed and become more precise since her last visit to the Association. The webmaster has added more information to the Merion Civic Association website for further information. Ms. Cohen stated that most of the students at the school live locally and many are walkers. The Yeshiva Lab School, a kindergarten with 17 students, 14 of whom live in the neighborhood, is located adjacent to the Julian Krinsky tennis club, and those 17 students would be relocated to the Kohelet High School campus. The overall vision of the school, the history of property acquisition of 280 and 284 Melrose Lane were again presented and can be referenced from the June meeting minutes.

Ms. Cohen stated that no access to the properties on Melrose would be from Melrose Lane itself and would contain no impervious surface. Security fencing, yet to be determined, would be installed for the benefit of both the school and the neighbors.

Discussion from the audience ensued surrounding the following issues:

1. Where will cars park on the weekends if people wish to have access to the fields to be located on the acquired property?
2. Where do the students live in regards to how many students will drive to the school? The potential number of drivers determines the number of parking spaces required. Ms. Cohen stated that the school was approved for 180 9-12th graders, and she cannot guarantee that the future number of drivers will not increase, although she emphasized that families locally are more likely, philosophically, to live locally and go to the school.

She also stated that some families have moved out in the past because the lack of lower grades at the school did not accommodate their educational needs. The school does draw students from northeast Philadelphia, Cherry Hill, NJ, and Elkins Park in the northern part of Montgomery County. Elementary school students, if they live within $\frac{3}{4}$ mile of the school, by law must be bused in the absence of sidewalks or the presence of busy thoroughfares, but parents will be encouraged to have their children walk or be bused rather than being dropped off by car. Kohelet students who travel by bus are bused directly to the school, and do not go to the established "hubs" that other private schools on the Main Line use. It was suggested by a neighbor that the school enforce low student driving numbers to be a good neighbor to the residents.

3. Has a feasibility study been done, i.e., is the school really going to thrive and succeed simply because the campus is enlarged?
4. Concern for "institutional creep" was expressed as some residents have heard that the house located next to Kohelet on Highland Avenue will be sold to Kohelet. Traffic in the neighborhood is already a major problem, because of the French School across the street as well as the Bala Cynwyd Library, and it was suggested that it is unrealistic to think that small children will be allowed to cross Old Lancaster Road by themselves. The character of the immediate neighborhood will be changed from residential to institutional.
5. A director of the Merion Civic Association explained at length that because of the wording of the current zoning code, which no longer stipulates that the welfare of the neighborhood needs to be considered, and which provides for "special exception" appeals to the Zoning Board, the best recourse for stopping "institutional creep" is to change the composition of the Board of Commissioners at the ballot box. One resident appealed to the audience to not acquiesce to the proposed expansion plans, but to fight them at the Zoning Hearing Board meetings, despite the Commissioners' tendency to approve greater institutional density.
6. The Kohelet School proposes sponsoring summer and winter camps, which it characterizes as a recruiting tool. Neighbors responded that camps are camps and asked that Kohelet leaders talk directly with the neighbors about its plans. There was wide support for the idea that Kohelet should consider moving its campus if its needs no longer are met by the current property size, as did Akiba Academy when it moved.
7. Commissioner Gordon, in response to why the Commissioners have not made any attempt to rewrite the zoning code to include the "welfare" clause and halt development, re-stated the earlier point that the courts, by deleting the "welfare" control the rate of development.
8. The issue of "not in my backyard" was raised by a resident, who stated that the members of the Orthodox community are enriching the neighborhood and do not want the opposition to the expansion of their schools to eventually exclude them from the neighborhood.
9. The Zoning Hearing Board will discuss the Kohelet expansion plan at the Thursday, September 24th meeting at the Township Building, beginning at 7:15 p.m.

Approval of Minutes

A motion was made and seconded and the June meeting minutes were approved unanimously.

Treasurer's Report – Robert Marmon presented the Treasurer's report for June, July, and August 2015. A motion was made and seconded and the Treasurer's Report was approved unanimously.

President's Report – President Seiden omitted his report in the interest of time, as the discussion about the Kohelet High School lasted longer than expected.

Committee/Representative Reports:

Land Use, Zoning and Community Relations: Les Greenberg responded to an audience inquiry about passing an amendment related to building height proposals on City Avenue, stating that the timing of such an amendment proposal needs to be considered. The Wendy's restaurant on City Avenue was discussed at the previous evening's Building and Planning Committee as regards moving the restaurant closer to the street, with parking in the rear, to stop the negative esthetic of parking in front of the building.

Commissioner's Report: Commissioner Gordon reported that Merion is exempt from the State requirement that all street signs in Lower Merion must conform to the newer, more modern version. There is consensus in Merion that the old signs should be preserved and refurbished.

The Merion Mercy Academy plans to reconfigure and rebuild a wing of the campus was approved by the Land Use Committee. The Jewish Social Services groundbreaking at its new site on Montgomery Avenue is imminent even though the Zoning Board has not given approval for final plans.

Commissioner Gordon reported that he held a mediation meeting with various factions of neighbors regarding the Kohelet development, but does not know where those parties stand at the moment. He stated that a more accurate traffic study of the effects of the project may not work in favor of approval of the project.

No Township tax increase has been proposed in the new budget. More resources are being put into roads in response to resident complaints after the winter months.

Old Business – The previously tabled item regarding a contribution to the Build On organization, remains tabled, for lack of time to address the issue.

New Business – A resident living close to the St. Charles Seminary reported that director, Todd Sinai, wrote a letter to the Lower Merion Chief of Police to ask if any plans had been made to respond to a possible crowd of thousands of visitors coming to the Merion/Wynnewood neighborhood to attend a Papal activity newly added to his schedule. There is concern that residential properties could be overrun with visitors and that for a lack of any amenities provided, might despoil the residential properties. The Chief of Police responded that plans would be made to accommodate a large number of visitors without any detriment to the residents.

Director George Ross questioned our meeting format when guests are invited to speak, suggesting that the presenter exit the meeting before full discussion of the presentation proceeds in order to insure that dialogue is open and free.

Finally, Commissioner Gordon proposed that Thomas Schmuhl, attorney, and concerned neighbor, write a draft resolution on behalf of the Merion Civic Association, in opposition to the Kohelet expansion. A motion was made, seconded and approved unanimously to appoint a committee of directors to assist Mr. Schmuhl.

There being no further new business, a motion was made and seconded and the meeting was adjourned at 10:30 p.m. The 102nd Annual Meeting of the Merion Civic Association is scheduled for Sunday, October 18, 4-7 p.m. The next meeting of the Board of Directors will be held at the Merion Tribute House on Tuesday, October 27, 2015 at 7:30 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,
Helen Guy, Secretary