
MERCHANTVILLE REDEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

MEETING MINUTES

Committee Meeting #2

April 13, 2015 6PM

Merchantville Borough Hall

ATTENDEES:

Mayor Ted Brennan
Bill Lammey
Michael McLoone
Ryan Middleton

Denise Brouse
Mara Wuebker
Michael Wisnosky

HANDOUTS:

Municipal Statistical Data from Rutgers
Draft Existing Land Use Parking Analysis

1. POTENTIAL PROJECT NAMES

Some potential project names discussed thus far: Park Centre, Park Central(e), Cattell Village, Cattell Centre, Cattell Crossing, Park Promenade, Park Place, Chestnut Park Centre, Merchant's Square, Merchant's Station, or Merchant's Place, The Triangle, The Village Square, Knight's Square...

We may have the attendees at the public workshop vote on it. For example, give everyone a sticker as they walk into the workshop and they'll cast their vote (i.e., post their sticker on the wall next to the name they like best). Committee members also discussed holding off naming the project because we may not know the most appropriate name until the concept is more fully developed. Also, the eventual redeveloper may want to name it his or herself.

2. IDENTIFICATION OF GOALS FOR REDEVELOPMENT AREA

A. PEDESTRIAN-ORIENTED

Pedestrians are critical part of downtown life. It must feel inviting to pedestrians; there must be interesting things to look at from a pedestrian perspective, with connectivity to bike path and to transit. No dead spaces.

B. TO CREATE A DESTINATION (OR NETWORK OF DESTINATIONS) THAT WILL ATTRACT PEOPLE TO THE DOWNTOWN.

The committee discussed wanting the redevelopment to enhance Merchantville's ability to draw customers and visitors to the downtown by creating a destination or network of destinations. They want to give people a reason to come to Merchantville for an activity and to linger.

The committee discussed the importance of street level activity for downtown vitality. Typically, residential uses are not desirable on the first floor in downtowns. While committee members agreed that there should not be any residential on the first floors of any infill on Centre Street and Park Ave. Committee members disagreed whether any redevelopment along Chestnut should be strictly residential or whether there could be commercial or office on the first floor with residential above. Committee members who want strictly residential on Chestnut are concerned with fitting in with the existing residential character across the street. Housing can have a garage tucked in to the first floor (ex. race track). Various concepts may be developed – one with strictly residential and one with mixed uses along Chestnut Avenue. There may need to be flexibility, based upon market conditions and what a developer can get financed.

C. CREATE SENSE OF PLACE WITH ARCHITECTURAL CHARACTER

Sense of place is a perception that a particular environment is unique and special. Committee members discussed the desire for the redevelopment area to be well-planned, have old town charm, development that will have a long shelf life, and something that they will be proud of for future generations.

Committee members did not want to see useless gaps in the streetscape – any potential gaps should serve as either planned green space or pedestrian or bike path link.

The committee wants new construction to have attractive architectural character. Committee members discussed using architectural elements to help create a sense of place, by having each building be unique on the exterior facade, with variations in materials, setbacks, and using human scale, and complement the desired small town charm.

D. FINANCIALLY FEASIBLE TO A REDEVELOPER

The committee discussed the need for balancing the Borough's social objectives with a Redeveloper's desire to make a profit. The strength of the current housing, commercial, and office market was discussed. We may need to motivate a redeveloper on developing mixed use buildings or commercial building b/c residential is the real money maker in this market. Currently, the strongest market is rental housing. The committee discussed potentially inviting developers into the discussion as a sounding board – since they will know what can get financed and what will be desirable from a developer's perspective.

The Committee discussed that structured parking would probably not be financially feasible without a tremendous amount of density, which is what was one of the major problems with first redevelopment scenario. The high density was believed to be too dense, not fitting in with the desired small town charm.

E. ADEQUATE PARKING FOR THE DOWNTOWN

The committee discussed the challenges with being able to add a significant amount of parking without a structured parking facility. Parking lots create unattractive, dead space in downtowns. The Borough is pursuing a shared parking agreement with Verizon and the Church. The committee discussed ways of adding parking spaces to streets by potentially converting some streets, like Park and Chestnut Avenues, into one-way with angled or 90 degree parking.

The group discussed a draft parking analysis based on current land uses on Block 29 that was prepared by RDG. Using the Borough's existing zoning standards, parking needs are approximately 94 parking spaces (not including a user at PNC Bank). The Standard does not take into account efficiencies that are created when there is a shared parking facility and it does not take into account real life needs, which may be different than the standard in the Z.O.. Also, land uses change over time so there are drawbacks to this type of analysis.

Using the analysis, there are 40 on-street parking spaces (on the east side of Centre Street, on the south side of East Chestnut Avenue, and along Park Avenue) with 28 private off-street parking spaces (Medical Office and The Station Coffee House). If the existing municipal parking facility is eliminated, this would result in a parking need of 26 parking spaces somewhere else (not including redevelopment needs).

The committee discussed some of the ideas that were in the RDG parking study from 2008, which was emailed over the weekend, including making West Park Avenue one-way with angled parking. At the time of the study, all of the average occupancy rates were below 85% optimal occupancy. There seemed to be a misperception that there are no available meters. On-street parking looks full because most obvious spaces are on Centre Street, which had the highest occupancy rates. But West Park Avenue only had 30% average occupancy rate, which indicates more of a parking management problem, than a parking supply problem for short-term parkers. Also, visitors don't know where to park for long-term parking due to poor signage. There were complaints from businesses not having convenient long-term parking for business owners to unload and load their cars, for their employees to park, and for upper story residential tenants. There were also complains about no 15-minute parking for quick convenience stops. At the time the parking meters were changed from 1 hour to 2 hours, based on the study.

3. UPDATES

- A. Verizon and/or Grace Episcopal Church Parking Lots - Mara will supply the Mayor with revised plans.
- B. Environmental Contamination – The Mayor will follow up with ERI on status of HDSR funds application.
- C. Demolition/Acquisition – Borough received 2 bids that were high. There may be asbestos issues with some of the buildings that were not considered originally. ERI is supposed to be evaluating the buildings. An OTSC has been filed with courts for Cummins to demonstrate the property is not a safety hazard.

D. Bike Path Extension into Pennsauken along Redevelopment Area – Pennsauken got a \$750K DOT TAP grant to extend path from Cove Road to Bethel. This has potential to bring additional users into the downtown.

E. Proposed liquor license legislation introduced by Assemblyman John Burzichelli – Burzichelli Bill to allow new type of liquor license for small restaurants would allow them to sell alcohol to patrons at tables, provided no bar. It's being proposed to help revitalize towns where restaurants are the anchor tenants in struggling commercial and arts districts. Tax credits are proposed for those who already hold standard licenses. No municipal population limit. However, the Mayor does not believe that this bill is moving forward. There is a strong liquor lobby that is against it.

Some towns have used Consessionaire's license – which is an annual license for a not for profit entity. It's available when town owns property and/or building. Collingswood uses it for Scottish Rite Auditorium. This is a real potential for reuse of the bank building.

Microbreweries are popular now in towns like Mt. Holly – they don't need liquor license. There is a tour and a tasting room, but can't serve food. Other ideas discussed for bank building were a community theater (like in Pitman), a craft mall. The Pop Shop in Medford just opened in a former bank building.

4. SITE WALK

Committee members toured inside the PNC bank property and photos were posted on the Merchantville Downtown Redevelopment Initiative Facebook page. The Committee also walked around the redevelopment area and discussed potential for courtyard behind Cigar Alley and McFarlan's Market. The Committee discussed continued vehicular access for the Station Coffee House and Medical Office Building property as it's only a one-way into the site. Property lines were discussed.

5. NEXT MEETINGS

The Committee will meet at 6pm on April 27th and May 12th at Borough Hall conference room.

6. PUBLIC WORKSHOP

The Committee talked about trying to hold a public workshop before Memorial Day. Otherwise, it may be challenging to get people to attend during the summer.