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**MERCHANTVILLE REDEVELOPMENT  
PUBLIC WORKSHOP  
MINUTES**

May 28, 2015 7PM  
Merchantville Community Center

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**ATTENDEES:**

Mike McLoone  
Maureen McLoone  
John Woodruff  
John Forberger  
Tara Gore  
Richard Lobb  
Katherine Swann  
Bill Lammey  
Pam Matukonis  
Ryan Middleton  
Jennifer North

Paul Stridick  
John Palide  
Rosemari Hicks  
Janet Stevens  
Pete Burgess  
Kelly Jackson  
Mark Jackson  
Dan Sperrazza  
Mara Wuebker  
Rick Ragan  
Mayor Ted Brennan

**HANDOUT:**

Power Point Presentation

**WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION**

Mayor Brennan introduced Mara Wuebker, a planner with the Ragan Design Group, as well as Redevelopment Committee Members. Mara provided a brief introduction about her planning work in Merchantville, the grant that is funding this planning process, and her role in the redevelopment initiative.

The Mayor and Mara provided an overview of the existing conditions of the redevelopment area, as well as a summary of the work that the Redevelopment Committee has been doing. The site was declared an Area in Need of Redevelopment in 2004. There have been two prior attempts to redevelop the site. The Borough owns 1.62 acres, consisting of 10 contiguous parcels, including the former PNC Bank Building. There is soil contamination so the Borough will be submitting a grant application for Hazardous Discharge Site Remediation Funds. Additionally, the Borough is pursuing shared parking opportunities with the Verizon and Grace Episcopal Church.

Mara recapped the following committee efforts to date.

## **SWOT**

The committee first conducted a SWOT Analysis, where committee members evaluated the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the redevelopment area. The handout summarizes the SWOT analysis in detail.

Mara discussed some of the challenges of the site, such as the triangular shape, awkward chestnut/park intersection, narrowness of Park Ave, soil contamination issues, as well as unavailability of liquor license. It was explained that liquor licenses in NJ are currently based on population. 1 permit /3,000 persons. Merchantville has 3800± persons. The committee has discussed other opportunities, such as an annual concessionaire's license. Some of the opportunities discussed were adding more commercial uses to the downtown, adding more residents which will provide built in customers for the downtown businesses, as well as creating a unique space that will draw people to Merchantville's downtown, rather than to surrounding communities.

Mara recapped some of the "threats," including suburban parking mentality, the property on Park Avenue that is not owned by the Borough (cummins property). There is also the threat of not having a shared vision between the committee, council, and the public throughout the life of the redevelopment project. While it's impossible to get everyone to agree on a vision, it is important to try to generate a majority consensus on the issues. Without a shared vision there is potential for unpredictability and risk for the Borough and redeveloper. The ultimate goal is to build on identified strengths, reduce weaknesses, embrace opportunities, and minimize threats to extent feasible.

Public Comments: One person asked whether the EMT building could be converted to the library, providing school ability to expand into the library space. There was discussion whether it would be feasible since it's a county library system and it was believed that there would need to be a lot of improvements that the Borough would need to make it suitable for a library. Another person commented that there is a strong desire to add to the tax base by adding commercial uses.

## **GOALS**

Mara summarized the second step that the Committee conducted, which was developing goals for the redevelopment area- the goals set the policy that should drive the development of concepts. There are 5 identified redevelopment goals: 1) pedestrian oriented, 2) create a destination or network of destinations that will attract people to the downtown, 3) create sense of place with architectural character, 4) financially feasible to a redeveloper, and 5) adequate parking for the downtown.

## **CONCEPTS**

The third step the committee undertook was developing concepts. She recapped that the Committee sketched on trace paper over a base map to identify potential locations of types of uses and locations of parking. RDG then drafted the layout of proposed designs, based on the

sketches. After more feedback at the next meeting, RDG formalized the designs with color, photos, etc.

### Public comment

A resident asked whether the needed parking for proposed uses has been calculated. Mara explained that the scenarios are just conceptual at this point; there has been a very loose analysis of square footage and number of parking spaces, but a formal analysis has not been conducted to see whether the proposed uses could meet parking standards. Parking needs depend on the actual uses - - as retail will have different parking needs than office, or restaurants. It was noted that there will also be some efficiencies that take place with shared parking. Some of the proposals suggest adding more parking on Chestnut, while all of them anticipate using parking on the Verizon site. The resident asked about the number of existing parking spaces. Mara believes the current parking area in the triangle contains about 90 parking spaces, based on her recollection from parking study, which generously counted parking spaces, such as parallel parking along the drive-thru of PNC Bank and back to back spaces.

Mara provided the following overview of the various concepts that have been prepared thus far:

### Concept 1:



This concept fills in the gaps on Centre Street with two mixed use buildings (retail with apartments or offices above). There is an arched pedestrian walkway that connects to the bike path and with the parking in the interior of the site. Concept 1 contains a court yard behind the former PNC Bank and Adobos for outside dining or gathering space for other outdoor activities or festivities. The concept proposes townhouses and a recreation amenity along the bike path. In this scenario, residential was chosen in order to fit in with the mostly residential character of Chestnut Avenue on the other side of the street. It was also incorporated because it is believed residential units may be needed in order to entice a redeveloper to do other aspects of the design. This scenario also proposes mixed use buildings along Park Avenue. In sum, there is 7,000± sq feet of retail, 8 or more apartments above (depending on bldg. stories), and 10 townhouses. It contains about 56 parking spaces.

### Public Comments:

One resident expressed that she does not like townhomes because she sees them as signs of “upward mobility.” She recently moved to Merchantville and she loves being able to walk into the downtown and the Farmers Market.

There was discussion about the Lumberyards in Collingswood and that structured parking can be very costly, which adds to the price of the units. It was noted that the Committee had discussed the possibility of structured parking initially, but came to the consensus that it would not be financially feasible with the amount of density that the Borough would consider. More density would be needed to offset the costs of the parking facility.

There was a discussion about parking challenges when restaurant traffic coincides with the timing of residential traffic and parking needs. Collingswood was used as the example. Visitors come to Collingwood in the evening to go to the restaurants at the same time that residents are coming home from work, resulting in increased traffic and parking needs.

One resident liked the idea of the recreational amenity at the bike path, but thinks it should be closer to the heart of the downtown. She recommended that a recreational play structure be located next to the train station coffee house on the NJ Transit property. She thinks it would be a valuable asset for the bike path and for the downtown, as no other towns have playground structure in their downtown.

### Concept 2

The second scenario specifically does not include any residential uses on the first floors in order to enhance street level activity in the downtown and to provide more opportunities for people to shop, eat, and linger, etc. Like concept one, this concept fills in the gaps along Centre Street with mixed use buildings and provides mixed use buildings (retail with apartments or condos above) along Park Avenue. It also proposes a courtyard for dining or other activities behind PNC building and Adobos. Along Chestnut, however, it proposes more mixed use buildings with retail on the first floor, like a bicycle or ice cream shop that lends itself to the bike path, with apartments above. Alternatively, it proposes a conference center, commercial gym space, or a satellite campus for a college. The concept also incorporates a large monument style

building closer to the intersection of Chestnut and Park Avenue – a building that would have strong architecture to signify entrance into the downtown and hold down the unusual shape of the site at that corner. It proposes approximately 20,000 sq feet of retail with approximately 14 apartments or condominiums above and 51 parking spaces. It also envisions widening East Park Avenue to better accommodate on-street parking, as well as changing Chestnut Avenue to a one-way street with angled parking to add more parking to serve the downtown.



**Public Comments:**

There was a discussion about the circulation on Chestnut. The consensus is that if there is a one-way that it should go in the westbound direction to bring people into the center of town and also people now commonly believe that North Chestnut is a one-way, particularly west of Centre. There was a discussion that can get 60% more parking if do angled parking. Mara has met with County Engineer who is open to changing circulation patterns and on-street parking.

**Concept 3**

This concept proposes infill of a mixed-use building in between PNC Bank building and the medical office building, as well as a pedestrian walkway (lit up with café lights, for ex.) connecting Centre Street to a courtyard (with slate style patio, for ex.) for outside dining and other events. It assumes that PNC Bank is converted into a restaurant and there would be

outdoor seating with awnings off the back of Adobos and the PNC restaurant. Additionally, there are mixed-use buildings (retail on first floor with apartments or condominiums above) that line E. Park Avenue. There is a cut-through of the first floor that would provide an interesting pedestrian connection to the bike path. Along Chestnut, there is another mixed-use space building next to the train station building, as well as four upscale twins with porches overlooking the bike path. Chestnut Street is converted to a one-way to allow angled parking on the south side of Chestnut Street in order to provide more parking for the redevelopment area. It also envisions converting the intersection into a modern roundabout. This concept would add about 8,100 square feet of retail, 4 twins, and about 10 second floor apartments or condos (more if 3<sup>rd</sup> floors are considered).



### Public Comments

Resident expressed that she liked this concept – she liked the upscale townhouses and the unique cut-through design for the mixed use building on Park Avenue, but she does not like the idea of adding any apartments in the downtown. She is concerned about adding more transient residents; she would prefer to see more upscale residential dwellings if going to do any residences. She feels strongly that the Borough needs to focus on increasing the tax rates as



or some other retail. This concept also has a pedestrian walkway from Centre Street that would lead to the piazza, as well as a pedestrian connection to the bike path.

There are 4 large townhouses shown, but there could also be other types of residential. This concept maintains parking in between cigar alley and PNC bank in order to be sensitive to the existing businesses who may be concerned about removing nearby parking because we wanted to show at least one concept that maintained this parking, but this concept would work better if that parking was not there to create better linkage between Centre Street and the piazza area.

Thus, this concept proposes 4 townhouses, approximately 8 upstairs apartments (more if 3<sup>rd</sup> stories are considered) and about 6,500 sq ft of retail/restaurant space (more if upper floors are used for restaurant or other commercial space). This concept also assumes that Chestnut would be converted to one-way with angled parking. It shows back in angled parking (ex. Headhouse square area in Philadelphia). The photos show different options for the piazza area, including an expanded version of King's court in Haddonfield, Historic Federal Hill in Providence, the piazza in Philly, and another graphic that shows dancing fountain and outdoor eating areas.

### Public Comments

There was a discussion about parking creating dead space in downtowns. There was a discussion about wanting to move the piazza in Concept 4 so it fronts more on the bike path. It was explained that the original intention was to have two fronts to the larger retail building so it would front both on the piazza and on the bike path, but NJ Transit owns that property. It was decided that at this point, it would be prudent to not show any buildings on that property until there is permission to build on it, so it was decided to keep the parking that currently exists there. The parking and drive aisle also provides a means of egress from the train station parking lot because it's only a one-way in to the parking lot.

The Mayor explained that the Borough can pick and choose different features that it wants from the various concepts. It does not have to stick with one particular concept in its entirety.

### **VOTE WITH YOUR FEET**

Mara asked a series of redevelopment-based questions and participants were asked to walk over to the particular poster board that reflected their opinion (Agree, Somewhat Agree, Somewhat Disagree, and Disagree). Participants were asked if they wanted to provide comment for why they voted the way they did. Participants were also able to change their opinion by moving to other areas of the room at any time.

### Question 1: I like at least one of the proposed concepts.

Everyone, but one person, either "agreed" or "somewhat agreed." They were asked what they liked about the concepts. Most people said they liked options 3 or 4 best. Someone expressed that they liked concept 3 because they felt that the upscale twins were a good match for Chestnut Street and they liked the design with the cut through under the second story of the building. Someone said they liked option 4 best because it gave opportunity to create unique and special

space and that it can be used for different purposes. Someone else said she liked the cluster of businesses in concept 4. There was discussion of wanting Park Ave to be more connected.

The one resident who voted “somewhat disagreed” said that she felt that the entire downtown should be non-residential. She didn’t think there should be any townhouses or twins in the central business district.

Question 2: I do not like any of the proposed concepts.

See discussion above. No one said they did not like any of the proposed concepts. The one person who somewhat didn’t like the concepts was because she did not like the residential components. She felt the downtown should be all commercial.

Question 3: I do not want to see any changes in the Redevelopment Area

Everyone “disagreed” or “somewhat disagreed.” Everyone wants to see changes in the Redevelopment Area.

Question 4: I like the idea of widening E. Park Avenue to improve parallel parking on the street.

Everyone agreed, except one person. She explained that she does not want to see any on-street parking in front of businesses. She feels that it detracts from businesses. She feels that people don’t see an open spot so they decide to leave, rather than finding a parking space a little further away. She recommends replacing parking areas with wider sidewalks. She suggested removing the parking spaces along Centre Street to widen the sidewalk and create more opportunities for pedestrian activity and for the display of merchandise in front of storefronts. She believes the parked cars on Centre Street detract from the success of retailers because people cannot see the storefronts as they drive by and because there is an appearance that there is no parking available on Centre Street. This effort would be coupled by a signage campaign that would direct people to appropriate places to park. It was also suggested that there be 15 minute parking spaces on Centre Street if there is parking on the street.

Mara suggested that could always do a parklet trial by doing a temporary popup parklet. Collingswood has one outside of the coffee shop. There was a discussion of the fact that Centre, Park, and Chestnut are county roads. Mara said the parking study recommended including 2- 15 minute parking spaces on Centre Street, but does not think that it was implemented. It may want to be revisited.

Mara relayed that there is a perception from Merchantville’s business community that there needs to be parking right out of front of businesses or customers won’t come. She recapped the committee’s discussion of the suburban parking mentality. She recapped one of committee members examples that people are willing to park far away in Wegman’s parking lot, but don’t want to park a block away in downtown even though technically closer than where they’d park at Wegmanns.

Mara relayed that during the parking study, there were complaints from businesses that there wasn’t enough parking. It was believed that it was a misperception because even when Centre

Street was fully parked, there was always nearby parking on West Park Avenue. Park Avenue public r.o.w. is 50 feet, but it only measures 27 -28 feet curb to curb.

Question 5: I like the idea of changing N. Chestnut Avenue to a one-way street to provide more parking spaces, if needed for the downtown. (one row of parallel parking and one row of angled parking).

Everyone “agreed” or “somewhat agreed.” One of the residents who live on Chestnut said that she would be agreeable to this idea because she likes angled parking (common in historic downtowns) and it would be easier for her to back out of her driveway with only traffic coming from one direction.

There was a discussion of the direction of the traffic flow. There was consensus that should travel westbound towards center of town.

Question 6: I think the Borough should make all efforts to keep the former PNC Bank as part of future redevelopment.

Originally, the majority of attendees “agreed,” 1 person “somewhat agreed,” and three people “disagreed” with this statement. For those who agreed, it was expressed that they feel the former PNC bank building is an integral part of history of the town and the Borough has lost too many buildings already, such as Potters Hall. People move to Merchantville because of the historic buildings. That is what makes Merchantville unique. They would like to see it be reused as a restaurant, micro brewery, retail, office space.

There was discussion about the possibility of doing a partial demolition, removing the drive-thru, keeping just the façade. However, one of the residents who is in construction stated that it would be very expensive to just keep the façade and very time consuming- the Borough would be better off recreating it, it would be less expensive and more stable.

For those who “disagree,” they said it was built in 1923, so it is not that historic of a building, and the inside of the building is really not special. It has been up for rent and sale with no success. It is going to be very expensive for someone to take it on to reuse it. It needs work.

There was a discussion that at times it has been actively marketed, but it hasn’t been consistently marketed. It will require a very unique tenant and will require a lot of investment to make the site work.

One person from the “somewhat agree” panel moved over to the “disagree” panel after hearing the discussion.

Question 7: I think the Borough should demolish the former PNC Bank building without attempting to reuse it for another use.

See discussion above for question 6.

Question 8: I think the N. chestnut Avenue-East Park Avenue intersection should be converted to a modern roundabout to improve circulation.

Most people “agree” or “somewhat agree.” One person said that the intersection needs to be improved, but he is not sure it needs to be a roundabout. There was a concern about how it would affect pedestrian usage and safety. They feel that the bike path and pedestrians should have priority. There was a discussion that pedestrians would not enter the roundabout center. Their path would be led around the roundabout. There was a discussion about the circulation and safety issues at Clifton and Chestnut. It’s believed to be dangerous now.

One person recommended that Chestnut Street become a cul-de-sac. It was discussed that it’s a county road and Mara expressed that it was her opinion that it would not be desirable to do that from a planning perspective – hindering circulation – better to have traditional style street patterns, then suburban style cul-de-sac.

There was discussion about the existing push button breaking. One person recommended that the Borough consider bulb-outs in the redevelopment area – it will add traffic calming and add greenery, will be added barrier to protect pedestrians. Mara suggested that bulb-out may be most appropriate on Chestnut where it’s a wider road – it provides shorter distance for pedestrians to cross road. Park Avenue is already very narrow.

Question 9: Do you have any suggestions for improving the concepts that the Committee should consider?

It was suggested that there be more commercial, and less residential uses.

Someone asked whether Borough is going to use tax abatements/PILOTs. The Mayor said that it is a tool that the Borough is considering using. Everything is on the table at this point. There was a discussion about how the Borough receives most of the money when there is a PILOT (payment in lieu of taxes), versus the taxes going to other entities like schools. There was also a discussion of the structuring of the payments. There was discussion of opportunity to add payments to the school district at some point, depending on what is ultimately built in the redevelopment area. It was acknowledged that this area of the downtown has been contributing taxes to help fund the schools, even though very limited impact on the schools coming from this area of the Borough.

There was a discussion about school choice and how state aid works. There was some disagreement about the particulars of this.

There was more discussion about whether to add residences in the central business district. There was a suggestion from a resident that the apartments should only be studio or one-bedroom apartments and that artists may want studio space. There was a concern expressed about adding families with children. The Mayor said there is no intent to include low and moderate income deed restricted units in the redevelopment area at this point. A resident suggested that we add residents who have more expendable income who will be able to purchase goods and services in the downtown.

One resident said that she doesn't mind the concept of adding apartments on upper floors, particularly if it is needed to make it enticing for a developer to want to do other aspects of the concepts, however, her primary concern is that the right type of retail is brought into the town. The retail should be things that are desirable for residents. She also suggested that gyms and other uses can be located on upper floors if don't need retail foot traffic.

## **NEXT STEPS**

The redevelopment committee will reconvene and discuss feedback from the workshop. We may decide to add, or fine tune, the concepts. Ultimately, Ragan Design Group will draft the plan amendment and there will be presentations and public hearings at Planning board and Council. June 2016 is ultimate deadline for the project, but would like to wrap up before then.

Attendees were thanked for attending and their generous participation. Minutes will be posted on Borough website.