

New Station, Mixed-Use Development Recommended for Ardmore Transit Center

But if a \$20M to \$23M funding gap cannot be closed, another option will be considered.

By: Alicia Guide

Business leaders and residents got their wish last night when the Economic Revitalization Committee of the Lower Merion Township Board of Commissioners recommended Option 2 for the Ardmore Transit Center, a proposal which would include a new train station, transit improvements and mixed-use development.

The Economic Revitalization Committee recommended in a 10-3 vote that the Board of Commissioners choose option 2, provided that a \$20 million to \$23 million funding gap can be closed.

If the money is not available to close the gap, the board will make a determination as to whether it wants to instead proceed with option 3, which would defer the new train station, according to the motion which approved with the vote.

The three commissioners who voted against the recommendation for Option 2 were Lewis Gould Jr., who made the motion, Jenny Brown, who seconded the motion, and Philip Rosenzweig. Gould spent more than an hour of meeting asking questions about funding for the project.

The committee also recommended 11-2 that the Board of Commissioners extend the development agreement between



Carl Dranoff, president and chief executive officer of Dranoff Properties, speaks to the Economic Revitalization Committee about options for the Ardmore revitalization project, for which he is the developer

Lower Merion Township and the developer for the project, Dranoff Properties, until Oct. 30, 2011 (an additional 120 days), in order to allow time for the parties to make revisions based on the proposed changes to the project and schedule. The agreement was set to expire June 30, 2011.

Gould and Brown cast the dissenting votes on the extension.

The committee was given a total of four options to choose from for the Ardmore revitalization

project, with option 2 being the recommendation of the Ad Hoc Ardmore Committee, and the option which business leaders and residents at the meeting asked the committee to support.

These four options were developed to help reduce the funding gap for the Ardmore revitalization project, which had a \$30 million funding gap under the original plan, said Board of Commissioners President Liz Rogan.

Option 2 calls for a new train station, tunnel, platforms and making the station compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Township Manager Doug Cleland said during a presentation about the options.

The train station would include 7,400 square feet of retail space at the transit center; a four-level parking garage which would include either 444 spaces if it had four levels, or 575 spaces if it had five levels; and 25 surface parking spaces, Cleland said.

Option 2 would also include a mixed-use development on Cricket Avenue, with 112 apartments and 11,000 square feet of retail space in a 7-story apartment building; and 112 private and 113 public parking spaces, Cleland said.

This option would increase parking in the area by 229-357 more spaces, but it has the largest funding gaps of all the proposals and the project would require zoning amendments, Cleland said.

Option 3 would defer the new train station and transit improvements until additional funding could be identified, but would be similar to option 2 because it would include the same parking garage at the train station and the mixed use development on Cricket Avenue, Cleland said.

The funding gap for option 3 is estimated to be \$8 million to \$10 million, Cleland said.

Option 4 is a proposal to make transit improvements but defer everything else: the new train station, the parking garage and the mixed use development, Cleland said.

Gould asked what the costs are for the transit improvements and ADA upgrades alone.

The current cost is \$13.5 million, with \$13.2 million of that for

the transit improvements, plus some money added in to account for design expenditures, said Angela Murray, the township's assistant director of community and economic development.

Option 1 would defer the new train station and transit improvements, but include construction of a private, mixed-use building and a 270-space parking garage, with a funding gap of \$5 million to \$10 million, Cleland said.

During public comment, Nancy Gold, president emeritus of the Ardmore Business Association, urged the committee to support option 2.

"We're so close now," said Gold, who is an Ardmore resident and owner of King's Collar Custom Shirtmakers. "There are businesses that are coming in. None of these businesses would be here if they didn't think something was happening."

Gold asked the committee not to delay moving forward with the project.

"Candidly, I think it needs to happen now," Gold said.

Christine Vilardo, executive director of the Ardmore Initiative, asked the committee to support option 2 and the extension of the development agreement.

Vilardo said better parking and the additional stores that the revitalization project would bring to Ardmore are a community benefit.

"I think the potential financial benefits are huge," Vilardo said. "This is an important project for Ardmore and the township."

Vilardo said she thought the developer, Carl Dranoff, was "taking the greatest financial risk here" and she asked the committee not to throw out the project because of funding gaps.

"I believe it is possible for the township to support this project

without a tax increase," Vilardo said.

Michael Depetris, a Lower Merion resident who specializes in commercial leasing as a partner in Legend Properties, said he was asking the committee to consider options 2 or 3.

Depetris said in his business experience, he has found that communities that have created additional parking, such as Media, have added to the success of the township's restaurant base.

"Projects beget other projects... That's how we're going to keep our taxes down," Depetris said.

After public remarks, commissioners discussed the options for the Ardmore Transit Center.

Commissioner Gould, who represents the Ward 11 communities of Gladwyne, Bryn Mawr and Rosemont, prefaced his comments and questions by saying that the first home he and his wife owned was in Ardmore, and he had "the utmost devotion to Ardmore and this township."

He also said he was the one who had helped secure a \$5.84 million federal grant for a new Ardmore transit center, a grant, he said, that is intended for a new train station and "that has been whittled away."

Gould asked how much of the grant money had already been spent by the township.

Murray said about \$2.5 million of the federal grant money had been spent on the project and that includes expenses for environmental testing costs.

Gould asked if the township had secured any other grant funding for the project.

Cleland and Murray said the township has \$15.5 million in state grants and a \$250,000 county grant, the latter of which is allo-

cated to 20 percent of the funds going to engineering costs and 80 percent of the grant for rear façade improvements to businesses.

SEPTA, co-owner of the train station along with Amtrak, had promised funding for the project but was unable to honor the promise because it lost state funding, Cleland said.

Gould asked what other sources were available for raising \$20 million to \$23 million to bridge the funding gap.

Cleland said for options 2 and 3, "Mr. Gould, the number one source of funding is SEPTA."

Gould, who said he formerly served as president of SEPTA's board, expressed skepticism.

"It's certainly not realistic you're going to get any money from SEPTA and you're certainly not going to get it from Amtrak," Gould said.

Murray said in discussions she has had with SEPTA in the past year, she was told that projects that have proceeded with designs will be the first in line for funding.

Commissioner Scott Zelov said the project could not go forward with the funding gaps that exist, but the committee should support option 2 with option 3 as a fallback.

"My view is why would we stop now?" Zelov said. "Why would we give up now?...The gap is smaller than when we last met here in February."

Zelov said the funding gap "needs to shrink to zero," but the goals are still attainable.

Rosenzweig said he was not prepared to support a particular option but he was willing to give the developer time to try to figure out how to come up with funding to fill the gap.

Rosenzweig also suggested

that the township reallocate funding for the Bala Cynwyd Library renovation and expansion project to the Ardmore Transit Center project.

"Perhaps Bala Cynwyd library could wait...That doesn't kick start economic revitalization but this does," Rosenzweig said.

Commissioner George T. Manos described Rosenzweig's comment about the library funds being reallocated as a Lower Merion version of the TV game show, "Deal or No Deal." Manos said he was speaking for Bala Cynwyd residents when he said "no deal" to Rosenzweig's suggestion.

"I would favor (option) number two because it gives you the biggest bang for the bucks you're spending," Manos said. "While funding is difficult and a challenge...this developer has risen to the challenge before."

Brown commended the developer for his work but stopped there with her praise.

"The township however has spent millions of dollars trying to revitalize Ardmore with essentially nothing to show for it," Brown said.

Brown also expressed concern that taxpayers would take on the cost of the project.

"Lower Merion taxpayers have an enormous target on their back," Brown said. "We're living in a fantasyland thinking that someone is going to come up with this money."

Commissioner Daniel Bernheim said he supported option 2.

"We do have a project on the table that has traction with the business community as well as the residents and we should take note of that..." Bernheim said.