

The stated meeting of the Board of Commissioners Working Session was held on Thursday, May 11, 2023 via webinar and in-person at the Township Administration Building, Abington, PA, with President Hecker presiding.

CALL TO ORDER: 8:08 p.m.

ROLL CALL: Present: Commissioners ROTHMAN, DiPLACIDO, VAUGHN, THOMPSON, WINEGRAD, HENRY, ZAPPONE, CARSWELL, SPIEGELMAN, BOLE, SCHREIBER, VAHEY, HECKER
Excused: Commissioners BRODSKY, BOWMAN

Also Present: Township Manager MANFREDI
Township Solicitor CLARKE

CONSIDER APPROVAL OF MINUTES:

Vice President Vahey made a MOTION, seconded by Commissioner Thompson to approve the minutes from the Working Session of April 13, 2023.

MOTION was ADOPTED 13-0.

PUBLIC COMMENT ON AGENDA ITEMS:

President Hecker announced that public comment will be taken following the agenda item.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS: None.

NEW BUSINESS:

Presentation on the Feasibility Study for potential Economic Development in Abington Township by Delta Development Group, Inc.

Mr. Darren Asper, Senior Vice President of Community Planning of Delta Development Group Inc., introduced Dane Higbee, Senior Consultant and Brandyn Smith, Consultant, and said the draft feasibility study includes an executive summary, demographic/market analysis, areas for economic development, economic development structures, funding opportunities, and an action/implementation plan. Also, a public meeting was held last month regarding economic development corporations.

Between 2010 and 2020, Abington's population grew from 55,419 to 58,502; median household income has remained constant; and between 2010 and 2022, the Township experienced the most job growth in the healthcare & social assistance industries as well as the professional scientific & technical service sector, which are research-related industries.

Data shows that the Township is growing, so there is a need for enhanced community facilities including parks and recreation, abundant retailers/restaurants, and employment opportunities. The high median household income demonstrates high viability for consumer spending at retailers, restaurants, and entertainment venues. Growth in the number of low-income households indicates a need to equitably lift these households through community revitalization projects.

Sites toured: Ardsley Station, Crestmont Station, Glenside Station, Hollywood, Huntingdon Valley Shopping Center, Keswick, McKinley, Meadowbrook Station, North Hills Station, Noble Station, Old York Road, Roslyn Station, Rydal Station, and Willow Grove Park Mall. Criteria for site evaluation includes market viability; motorized transportation access; nonmotorized transportation access; commercial property availability; the number of available acreage/lots and connectivity to Township's assets in which the market data for each site was presented.

An Economic Development Corporation (EDC) is a quasi-governmental, nonprofit organization with a mission to advance economic development in a defined geographic area. Its sole focus is connecting with local businesses to address their needs; promote the interests of small businesses within the community; and take the lead in development projects. The EDC would be eligible for regional, state, and federal grants to assist with business-promotion, technical assistance, and capital improvement projects. An EDC promotes forward-thinking and long-term vision for the community through the completion of smaller impactful projects.

EDC case studies in Discover Haverford and Lansdowne were presented.

Funding strategies for operating an EDC can be sustained through business memberships; contributions from municipalities; private foundation grants; revenue from renting/leasing of EDC-owned properties; and fees for assistance with grant and loan funding.

Grants and loans from local, state, and federal sources can be used to assist the EDC with acquisition and improvement of buildings and other properties as well as provide sustained revenue sources, improve aesthetics of the community, and promote increased commerce within the Township.

An EDC is governed by the Board of Directors typically comprised of nominees from municipal elected officials. The Board of Directors is comprised of an odd number of members to prevent potential tied votes. The Board of Directors meets at regularly scheduled intervals to make personnel decisions, review finances, and vote on contracts. The EDC with either share staff members with its home municipality or hire EDC-dedicated staff members.

Benefits of the EDC are transparency; fostering community buy-in and consensus; ability to secure funding; strengthening the private sector; and focus solely on economic development.

Action and implementation plan would include considering the establishment of an Economic Development Corporation; develop operational and capital funding strategy; identify economic development priorities in a five-year EDC Strategic Plan; begin implementing economic development projects and initiatives; establish public-private partnerships for improvement of key community assets; and benchmark and measure impact.

President Hecker asked for any comments from Commissioners.

Commissioner Carswell questioned whether there is a specific stretch of roadway on Old York Road that may be a top priority.

Mr. Asper replied the three areas would be the Noble Train Station, Penn State Abington, and Abington Hospital.

Commissioner Rothman questioned whether there is encouraging data for office space as part of the Willow Grove Mall.

Mr. Asper replied data showed a strong market for office space in this region, and this area is known for regional corporate headquarters for businesses. Due to the mall's access, it would be a good location for that type of redevelopment and having amenities and recreation along with office space would be attractive.

President Hecker asked what sectors of the industry are growing?

Mr. Higbee replied we can further break down the data as to what type of industries have grown or declined.

Commissioner Bole asked how can we get this data to existing business owners about where trends are going in the medium and long-term?

Mr. Asper replied that the draft report will be sent to the Township and posted on its website.

Commissioner Vaughn said if the mall turns into a mixed-use redevelopment, should the building remain as is with offices occupying existing space or should it be completely redeveloped such as the Promenade in Upper Dublin Township.

Mr. Asper replied we will continue seeing a decline in retail space. We have not advocated taking down the mall, but looked at it for potential reuse, which would be a good economic project.

Commissioner Henry asked how would changing the footprint of the mall benefit our residents?

Mr. Asper replied we did not look at all the staging opportunities, only what the future could be. However, if an EDC was involved as a co-developer of the site, it could work on a market analysis for additional office/retail space versus what there is now.

Commissioner Schreiber said she would like data on the type restaurants for the Roslyn Business District.

Mr. Asper replied we can provide additional data, but most like a mix of restaurants.

Commissioner Winegrad asked about seed money for the startup of an EDC and are they mandated to focus on specific projects?

Mr. Asper replied some EDCs get seed money from their municipality in which they may stipulate a five-year sliding scale. The EDC could solicit funds from the business community, foundations, and other entities for operations. For capital projects, the EDC can utilize their own budget or work with the municipality to get a local match.

The EDC would be a new entity, so there will be a feasibility study that provides direction, and initially there should be oversight by the Township making sure it's successful.

Commissioner Spiegelman asked for further explanation on the transparency of an EDC as well as the process of public-private partnerships.

Mr. Asper replied that the Board of Commissioners would establish the EDC appointing members with staggered terms. It is a public entity that will have a budget, and startup funds from the Township will be included in its budget process. Once the EDC is established, they will hold monthly meetings that are open to the public.

Regarding funding for capital improvement projects, a resolution would need to be approved for any grants or low-interest loan, and if the Township is backing it, the Board of Commissioners needs to approve a resolution.

Also, once a developer is selected not only do they need to work with the EDC, but they will also need to appear before the Township's Planning Commission, Zoning Hearing Board, and the Board of Commissioners to make their presentation.

President Hecker asked for the timeline of completion of the draft report.

Mr. Asper replied we will issue the revised draft report to the Township within the next few weeks.

President Hecker asked for any public comment.

Mike Tobin, resident, asked how the commingling of public-private funding works.

Mr. Asper replied that the EDC may retain the property and have a lease or rental agreement with a private entity.

Karen Milovcich, resident, expressed concern about "putting the land of our community in the hands of expending government and corporate landlords," so this is a huge mistake. She suggested asking the citizens for ideas.

Lora Lehmann, resident, expressed concern about mixed-use and apartments at the mall, and what would the benefits be for residents?

Lisa Mallon, resident, asked would the startup of an EDC be budget-neutral from a tax standpoint for residents.

Manager Manfredi replied until the report is finalized, public comment has been received, and the Board of Commissioners decides on how they want to proceed, the cost will be determined seeing how it fits into the budget.

ADJOURNMENT: 9:23 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Liz Vile, Minutes Secretary