



TOWNSHIP OF ABINGTON

Office of the Township Manager

MEETING NOTES

January 26, 2021 7:30 a.m.

TO: Richard J. Manfredi, Township Manager

DATE: JANUARY 26, 2021

SUBJECT: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE MEETING

REFERENCE: EDC MEETING OF JANUARY 26, 2021 VIA ZOOM

ATTENDEES: DOUG CALLANTINE, CHAIRMAN, COMMISSIONER VAHEY, BRUCE GOODMAN, LINDA MILLEVOI, ROBERT REICH, CHRIS LIONETTI, LIZ SMITH, MIKE MCPAUL, DAVE MULVEY, ERIN VIZZA, TOWNSHIP MANAGER MANFREDI, MARIA WYRSTA, ADMINISTRATIVE MANAGER

SUMMARY: AS FOLLOWS

General Discussion:

Economic impact of COVID-19 on Township financial status: last year's budget was difficult, and cuts were made across the board in every position to reduce Township costs. Revenues were significantly decreased by \$5.3 million and projection for the first quarter 2021 was a 25%-30% decrease in business tax revenue. Previously held roundtable discussion with business leaders helped model budget projections and possibly another one will be held in March.

The Township has been open for business since the beginning of the pandemic while adhering to CDC guidelines, and due to the difficulty of this past year, Township residents did not experience a property tax increase. Earned income taxes were off last year and Business Privilege and Mercantile Tax revenue is expected to be problematic next year, although we are hopeful that the pandemic ends with the rollout of vaccinations. The economic impact of COVID-19 has been severe, but the Township's rainy-day fund helped offset that deficit in which that approach has been taken over the years benefitting the Township.

Real estate market has been strong and housing values have increased over the past six-to 12 months, which should bode well not only for transfer and income taxes, but also property taxes over time. Also, increase in real estate value could help offset losses from tax appeals.

Economic Development Corporation status: Commissioners Spiegelman and Vahey hosted a fourth public information session that was held several months ago via Zoom and one more public meeting will be held and then there will be further deliberation by the Board of Commissioners.

Concern was expressed by members of the public about having guardrails in place to prevent any type of corruption and in response to that it was noted bylaws have been drafted to guard against that and other criticism was about a lack of a business plan. Also, it was suggested reviewing examples of successful EDC's from other communities, which is being worked on at the current time, and when that has been completed, the final public information meeting will be held.

Old York Road & Susquehanna Road Redevelopment status: there has been no acquisition by the Township of the property. Regarding intersection improvements, the design engineer will be submitting total project cost for design and construction including timeline of the project noting there is an extension in place until the end of June and the State has been contacted to request another extension due to the pandemic and impacts on grants.

Willow Grove Park Mall – Multifamily Development Plan: PREIT through their attorney submitted a proposed text amendment to the Township's Zoning Ordinance for residential units on the mall property. The Board of Commissioners decided prior to any formal consideration or any action, to refer it to the Planning Commission for thorough review, which is not acceptance by the Board of proposed text amendment. The proposed text amendment includes language allowing wood-framed construction and that is not permitted per the Township's Non-Combustible Ordinance.

A letter was submitted to the Planning Commission making clear to them the position of the Board of Commissioners that no wood-framed construction/structures are permitted in the Township, and that the Board would like the Planning Commission to begin the public input process and to perform a thorough review and objective analysis. Following that process, it will be sent back to the Committee of the Whole and then the Board will decide whether to entertain the amendment at all.

To help malls survive, there has been a mixed-use trend of residential development surrounding commercial, and the applicant will need to make their case to the Planning Commission and then to the Board of Commissioners.

It was noted that the wood used for construction is noncombustible and the structure is made of fire-retardant treated wood, which is recognized by building codes as life-safety is the number one priority.

It was also noted that the Township's noncombustible ordinance states that residential buildings of a certain size cannot be built using wood-framed construction and text amendment carves out an exception to that Townshipwide rule for properties meeting that description. Suggested to the EDC was that they could offer their various viewpoints about proposed amendment and submit them in writing or make comments at future meetings as feedback is welcome.

It was also noted that ordinances from other municipalities allows wood-framed construction for four-story buildings and it would be a shame to lose this opportunity because the mall desperately needs it and will help with the economics of the Township.

It was questioned whether the Township has created a taskforce to evaluate level of risk and evaluate the mall structure itself to determine whether this would help the mall as well as the rental opportunity going forward.

Township staff has been working all along with mall representatives to assist where needed and further discussion will be about the impact of how proposed redevelopment will help the mall survive, and feedback from the EDC will be part of the process.

It was suggested that the Township share with residents about the revenue impact of the mall and its importance to the operations of the Township. Also, if the Board of Commissioners would like to have an economic impact study done on the mall perhaps that would be a charge to give to the EDC to perform that task.

EDC grants – Glenside/Weldon Park Refurbishment: the parcel of land for revitalization is owned by Abington School District and Friends of Glenside Weldon is a subcommittee of the Glenside Youth Athletic Club, which is a 501C.3. Photos of the existing Glenside Weldon playground were presented, and the Friends of Glenside Weldon and Abington School District is working hard to preserve the “cheese” play structure, which is a piece of American art.

Rendering of proposed improvements to the playground was presented along with a summary of the project. Timeline for completion will be June/July 2021. Fundraising goal of \$75,000 has been reached and request is \$2,500 grant from Abington Township’s Economic Revitalization Grant Program.

Mr. Bruce Goodman made a MOTION, seconded by Ms. Liz Smith to approve the request for a \$2,500.00 grant from the Abington Township Economic Revitalization Grant Program for Glenside Weldon Park Refurbishment.

Motion was approved unanimously.

New Business: Commissioner Vahey expressed concern about the pandemic’s impact on the Township’s small businesses and questioned what the Township can do to assist, and for this matter to be discussed further by the EDC at a future meeting. And, although the Township has informed business owners about grants available at the County and State levels, any other ideas from the EDC can be submitted to him.

Also, it was questioned whether there has been a negative impact on funding that the Township receives from the State or County due to the impact of the pandemic and the response was that the Township will receive reduced liquid fuels funds.

CITIZENS COMMENTS AND RESPONSES:

Lora Lehmann, resident, expressed concern about the amount of public speaking time; also, about improvements made to the Township building, and the plan for the mall.

Cakky Evans, EAC member, reported that the EAC received a grant for LEED for Cities certification and would like to work with the EDC on it. Also, in 2019, the Township approved a “Ready for 100” resolution to transition to clean energy and a taskforce has been created who will be working on a climate action plan as well as a clean energy transition plan and she requested that one of the EDC members serve on that team.

Action Items and Responsibility:

Grant award from the Abington Township Economic Revitalization Grant Program for Glenside Weldon Park Refurbishment.

Discussion on the pandemic’s impact on small businesses by the EDC as a future agenda item.

Next meeting of the EDC will be held on Tuesday, February 23, 2021.

Meeting adjourned at 8:51 a.m.

Liz Vile, Minutes Secretary