

The Easton Planning Commission met on Wednesday, July 2, 2014 at 6:30 p.m. in City Council Chambers, Alpha Building, One South Third Street, Easton, PA 18042. Planning Commissioners Charles Elliott, Bonnie Winfield, Robert Sun, Dennis Lieb, William Heilman, and Mia Hatzis were in attendance. The following Planning & Codes staff members were present: Director of Planning & Codes George Kinney, Chief Planner Carl Manges, and City Planner Mike Handzo. City Solicitor Joel Scheer was also in attendance.

Mr. Elliott called the meeting to order at 6:30 p.m.

Mr. Manges indicated that the Special Exception application for 134 S. 6th Street had been withdrawn by the applicant.

Ms. Winfield moved, with Mr. Heilman seconding, that the minutes of the June 4, 2014 meeting be approved as presented. The motion passed unanimously.

Privilege of the Floor. No members of the public wished to address the Commission.

222 E. St. Joseph Street – Land Development and Special Exception. Mr. Manges read that the applicant, Housing Authority of the City of Easton, proposes to demolish an existing warehouse building and construct a residential low-rise with 10 dwelling units located at 222 E. St. Joseph Street. The existing warehouse is currently being used for storage by the applicant. The 24,225 square foot lot would contain 5 semi-detached dwelling units, each containing 2 bedrooms. The applicant has indicated that these dwelling units will be for affordable housing (rental) purposes once constructed. Also, there is a 15 space parking lot for the residents being proposed on this lot with this application.

The proposed A8-Residential Low-rise use is located in the South Side Zoning District, Block Class B, where residential low-rise uses are permitted by Special Exception per Article XIV §595-69.

Mr. Manges reported that the plans generally met the requirements of §520-36, Preapplication Requirements, and §520-37, Subdivision and Land Development Plan. Therefore, he communicated staff's recommendation that the Planning Commission grant conditional preliminary approval and recommend granting the Special Exception request for a Residential Low-rise to the Zoning Hearing Board.

A contingent to represent the applicant was present, consisting of Housing Authority Executive Director Gene Pambianchi, Mark Buchvalt of T&M Associates, and John Gibbons of KSK Architects. They presented renderings and floor plans of the proposed development. Mr. Buchvalt discussed the layout, orientation, and design of the site, and Mr. Gibbons discussed the architectural character and interior layout of the proposed units.

Mr. Lieb inquired about the applicant's process in determining that demolition and new construction was a preferable alternative to adaptive reuse of the existing warehouse. Mr. Gibbons indicated that this decision had been reached through consultation with Housing Authority staff, the Planning Bureau, and the public. In response to a question by Mr. Heilman, Mr. Buchvalt compared the footprint of the proposed development to the existing warehouse.

Mr. Sun asked about rental rates for the units. Mr. Pambianchi explained that tenants would pay approximately 30% of their monthly income as rent, with the remainder of the rent subsidized by HUD. In response to demographic questions by Mr. Sun, Mr. Pambianchi indicated the units would alleviate some of the unmet demand on the Housing Authority's current waiting list. Mr. Sun and Mr. Elliott inquired about the Housing Authority's selection process for tenants. Mr. Pambianchi indicated preference would be given to current Easton residents; discussed employment, background check, and reference requirements for tenants; and indicated tenants meeting these criteria would be selected in order of the Housing Authority's wait list.

Mr. Elliott opened the floor to the public for comments. Dr. Pat Vulcano, 531 Philadelphia Road, was present. He raised concerns regarding the proposed development's impacts on neighboring property values, tax revenue, rental rates, and parking. Dr. Vulcano discussed potential scenarios if the units were to be sold to real estate investors in the future. He stated that the Housing Authority's former Delaware Terrace development had generated crime, and implored that the proposed development not have the same effect.

Mr. Elliott requested clarification on the development's tax status, with Mr. Pambianchi indicating the Housing Authority would provide the City with a yearly payment in lieu of taxes. Mr. Sun asked about the possibility of the Housing Authority selling the units, with Mr. Pambianchi describing any sale as a difficult process. Mr. Elliott inquired about effects on property values. Mr. Pambianchi predicted, based on the Housing Authority's recent experience with Neston Heights, the development would have a positive effect on values.

Sandra Vulcano, 531 Philadelphia Road, was present. She raised concerns about the rental nature of the proposal and the Housing Authority's previous management of Delaware Terrace, and expressed her opinion that low-income ownership units would be preferable. She stated that there was already a large apartment building in the vicinity, and suggested that some of the building's units may already be Section 8 subsidized. Mr. Pambianchi responded that the proposal was for public housing units, not Section 8 housing. He stated that robust sales of ownership units interspersed among low-income rentals at Neston Heights suggested that the presence of rental public housing did not diminish a neighborhood's appeal to homeowners.

Mr. Lieb discussed the degree of ambiguity in speculating about property values, and indicated that the Planning Commission can only strive to promote high-quality developments with sound management. He reported that the Housing Authority was under different management than during the Delaware Terrace era, and that Neston Heights had proven well-managed. Mr. Lieb suggested that the Commission expect that the Housing Authority would provide the same sound management to the proposed development. He stated that the current economy provided more incentive to develop rental units versus homeownership units, and urged the Commission to remain mindful of this reality.

Mr. Elliott examined the staff draft resolution, and suggested an additional condition requiring the receipt of required variances. Mr. Heilman moved that the Planning Commission grant conditional preliminary approval of the plans, and recommend to the Zoning Hearing Board that the applicant's Special Exception request be granted, with the addition of Mr. Elliott's suggested condition. Mr. Lieb seconded the motion, which passed unanimously.

Mr. Elliott called a recess at 7:39 p.m. The meeting returned to order at 7:50 p.m.

Comprehensive Plan Rewrite Update. Mr. Manges reported that Urban Matrix had presented the Comprehensive Plan website (www.VisionEaston.org) to the Comprehensive Plan Rewrite Task Force, and that staff was reviewing a draft work document on existing conditions in Easton. He indicated the work was still on track for completion in December. Mr. Elliott indicated the Task Force would welcome more frequent communication with Urban Matrix, so Mr. Kinney suggested staff could request a list of milestones from them.

Environmental Advisory Council (EAC) Update. Mr. Elliott reported that Mr. Handzo was in attendance at the EAC's July meeting for a discussion of improved public participation in the City's stormwater management program. He discussed the effects of developments near Northampton Crossings on the City's stormwater management, and indicated the EAC would be inviting a speaker on this topic to a future meeting.

As there was no further business, the meeting was adjourned at 7:58 p.m.