



MONTGOMERY COUNTY PLANNING COMMISSION

MINUTES: Regular Monthly Board Meeting
Wednesday, April 14, 2021
Approved: May 12, 2021

BOARD MEMBERS ATTENDING: Steven Kline, Chair; Dulcie Flaharty, V-Chair; Charles Tornetta; Robert Blue; John Ernst; Obed Arango; Nicole Kline-Elsier; Jonathan Rinde

STAFF ATTENDING: Scott France, Eric Jarrell, Bill Hartman, Daniel Farina, Chloe Mohr, Pattie Guttenplan, John Marlatt, Karina Caddick

GUESTS: Mark Cassel, Director of Service Planning at Septa; David Morgan, Ambler resident; Elizabeth Emlen, Upper Frederick Township resident; Tamara Holt, Executive Brand Ambassador, AVE by Korman Communities

I. Call to Order / Board Comments

Steven Kline called the board meeting to order.

II. Minutes of March 10, 2021

Deferred

III. Public Comment

Mark Cassel from Septa made a comment that the Quarterly Construction Report, which will be presented during this meeting, is an informative and important tool that Septa will be utilizing.

David Morgan reminded the board that he commented at the March Board meeting about the importance of affordable housing and transit oriented development in Norristown. Mr. Morgan asked if someone could comment about the open space that is available near the transit center. He also wondered if we can assist with the need for Affordable Housing with adjustments to the size and cost of the Justice Center construction, the lower tax increases and federal funding. Scott France responded that an Affordable Housing strategic plan is currently in draft form and will likely be released later this year. The Planning Commission and other county departments are focused in assisting with the need for affordable house. There are multiple efforts and ideas and we are hopeful for public and private partnerships.

IV. Community Planning Assistance Contract Fee Adjustment

Presenter: Eric Jarrell

Eric Jarrell requested that the board approve an adjustment to the Planning Assistance program rate schedule. The Planning Commission currently has contracts with 35 of the 62 communities in Montgomery County. The contracts are for three years and include a defined work program. A contract can also include flexible assistance, which is when an assigned planner is available for planning related work, like an ordinance change. The County Commissioners goal for this program is to make planning assistance available to all its communities. Therefore the county subsidizes 50% of the cost for the contract. We review our fees annually and make adjustments. Mr. Jarrell proposed a 1% planner day rate increase. The proposed Planner Rate for a three-year planning assistance contract would be \$707 for the first year, \$714 for the second year and \$721 for the third year. The Short-term Contract rate would also increase by 1% to \$728. Eric Jarrell requested that the Board approve the increase of the Planner Day Rate effective June 1, 2021.

Motion: To approve the Community Planning Assistance Contract Fee Adjustment, by Mr. Kline, seconded by Mr. Ernst, and approved by all present.

V. Open Space Strategic Plan Update

Presenter: Bill Hartman

Bill Hartman provided an overview of the Open Space & Trails Strategic Plan for Montgomery County. The plan is currently in development and will include a strategic vision for the next ten years. The main objective for the plan is to develop a road map for open space preservation and trail development into the future. The Strategic Plan will begin by identifying the existing and proposed county trail network and existing protected open space inventory in Montgomery County. Mr. Hartman stated that it is important to develop criteria to prioritize projects and simultaneously work on different phases of multiple projects to be well-positioned when current opportunities arise. For trails, developing feasibility studies, engineering and design for future projects can assure that a project can be ready to move smoothly into construction. For open space, we need to keep focused to protect the county's most vulnerable open spaces from development. Therefore, we need to target grant and capital funds responsibly and be vigilant about opportunities to connect with local, state or federal partners to leverage funding. Mr. Hartman displayed a map of the existing protected open space and the current Primary Trail Network map and spoke in detail about the four sections in the Strategic Plan: Introduction, Open Space Conservation, County Park Expansion and Trail Development. Finally, we want to design and promote our county trail and open space network to for all of our residents and especially to broaden diversity, equity and inclusion.

VI. Median Housing Price Report

Presenter: Daniel Farina

Daniel Farina presented the 2020 Median Housing Price Report for Montgomery County. The county had 11,819 market rate sales of homes in 2020 which is a decrease of 3.5% from the previous year. The median sales price was \$335,000 during 2020 which is a significant increase of \$25,000 or 8.1% from 2019. The report also looks at the median price of new and existing homes in Montgomery County. New homes had a median sales price of \$455,261 which is almost a 6% increase from 2019. Similarly, existing homes had a median sales price of \$323,000 which is an increase of 9.5% from the previous year. The existing homes median price breaking the \$300,000 mark is unprecedented. The report also breaks down the figures by the housing types single family detach, single family attached and multifamily housing. All three types saw an increase: single family detached increased by 9.5%; single family attached by 5% and multifamily also rose by 5% from the previous year. Mr. Farina displayed a map of Montgomery County that showed a breakdown by Municipality of the median housing price. He noted that the most expensive median prices were in Lower Merion, Lower Gwynedd, and Bryn Athyn. The most affordable median price housing were located in Pottstown, Norristown and West Pottsgrove. A look at National and Northeast Region data shows a median sales price for existing single family homes was \$300,000 nationwide and \$341,700 in the Northeast Region, which is an increase of 9.3% and 13.1% respectively. Mr. Farina provided a summary of the report stating that the market is growing in price at a quicker rate than before the pandemic. The existing homes medium housing price increase of 9.5% is a sharp increase which is almost double from the year before. The current market greatly benefits the seller and currently prevents families from transitioning to home ownership.

Obed Arango thanked Mr. Farina for the presentation. He would like to encourage the Planning Commission and the commissioners to think about public policy that can assist with the disparity of housing. Mr. Arango has been concerned about the affordability of housing, which federally is less than 30% of family income. Norristown is listed on the report as a place with the most affordable housing. However, it is not affordable for the families that live in Norristown but instead for outside investors. The minorities that live there don't have a path or access to home ownership. Mr. Arango stated that it is important to create a system that will provide entry to affordable housing to senior citizens and the minority population.

VII. Quarterly Construction Report

Presenter: Daniel Farina

Daniel Farina provided a summary of the Quarterly Construction Report. This is a new data report for MCPC and the Commerce Department. It examines the inventory of all large multifamily and nonresidential development in Montgomery County and will be updated quarterly. The criteria for inclusion in the report is construction of 50+ multifamily units and non-residential development of at least 30,000 sq. ft. For the 1st quarter of 2021, the completed projects are 256 multifamily

units and 37,063 sq. ft. of nonresidential construction. The multifamily units are all at the 555 Flats Building in the PA Business Complex in Horsham Township. The non-residential 37+ square footage is at the Chop Specialty Care Center in Abington which is at the former YMCA site. Mr. Farina displayed a list of the active construction projects currently in either active construction or active land preparation. A map was displayed that shows where the construction is planned. There is a lot of construction taking place in the Willow Grove, Upper Dublin and North Penn area. Construction is also close to highways in the Norristown, Upper Merion Conshohocken and Plymouth areas. Mr. Farina reported that 1,888 residential units are currently under construction and 2,303,137 sq. ft. of nonresidential development is also under construction.

VIII. Souderton Borough Planning Assistance Presentation

Presenter: Chloe Mohr

Chloe Mohr presented a summary of the planning assistance contract for Souderton Borough. Souderton is in the northern part of the county and a member of the Indian Valley Regional Planning Commission. Ms. Mohr spoke about the demographics of Souderton which is 1.12 square miles with a dense population of just under 7,000 residents. The existing land use and zoning maps was displayed and the commercial corridor was highlighted on North Main Street and along Broad Street. There are ongoing revitalization efforts focused on supporting these commercial areas. Ms. Mohr also spoke about Souderton Connects which is a new organization, combining the business improvement district and main street organization. There have been a variety of efforts to draw people to the borough such as public art, wayfinding signs and organized events. Ms. Mohr spoke about major developments which included a multi-vendor indoor market, and a train station adaptive reuse of buildings which have been a draw to this area. The Broad Theater recently re-opened to the public in January, after some needed renovations. She also spoke about other previous contract work that included economic development, the borough hall site considerations, grant applications and other major developments. A major development for the borough is the site of the former Souderton High School. The property has been developed with two phases of townhomes with the remainder of the site under discussion and negotiation between the developer and the borough. The final site design and sketches of the site were displayed and shows additional townhomes, commercial buildings, combined use buildings, a public plaza, a neighborhood park and a lot of amenities. During the new contract the planning commission will assist with zoning updates, revitalization and economic development, park designs and planning for improved bicycling and walking infrastructure. Ms. Mohr also spoke about a joint grant with neighboring municipalities for a feasibility study of the Liberty Trail which Souderton hopes will advance their trail efforts.

IX. Montgomery Awards Update

Presenter: Pattie Guttenplan

Pattie Guttenplan provided an update of the Montgomery Awards program. The call for entries went out on February 24th with an entry deadline of March 31st. The Planning Commission received eleven Montgomery Award entries with an additional two that were carried over from last year. The program also received three nominations for the Environmental Stewardship Award and remain hopeful for the Planning Advocate Award. Ms. Guttenplan provided a summary of the entries that were received. There were four nominations received in the Institutional category, two for residential land development, two for mixed-use land development, one for environmental and three in the transportation/open space category. The Environmental Stewardship Award is awarded by the Montgomery County Conservation District and presented at the Montgomery Awards Ceremony. Three Environmental Stewardship award received three nominations in headwater restoration, innovative stormwater and environmental initiative. Ms. Guttenplan added that the Montgomery Awards program has had the privilege to present 222 awards since the beginning of the program, back in 1967.

X. Director's Report

1. Scott France and Matt Edmond introduced Laureen Sendel-Grant who joins us as a Principal Transportation Planner. Laureen is an engineer by trade and has a military background.
2. Mr. France and Anne Leavitt-Gruberger introduced Simon Bernnard who joins MCPC as a County Planner. Simon recently graduated with a masters from the Bloustein School of Planning at Rutgers University.

3. The Planning Commission is looking to fill an open Transportation Planner position and asking for recommendations. Mr. France added that he will introduce a new Community Planner who will be starting shortly at our May board meeting.
4. Mr. France provided an update on a new product called Nearmap. It is a high resolution aerial map software program that is updated frequently. The county has made their license available to all municipalities.
5. Mr. France provided an update on the American Recovery Program that is dedicated to the recovery efforts due to COVID-19. The funds will benefit our residents, businesses and local governments. Mr. France also spoke about the The Community Projects Funds, The Surface Transportation Reauthorization and the American Jobs Plan.
6. The KOP Rail project is progressing forward and currently at the 30% design with full funding for this phase. Septa is looking at risk assessment and are performing a TOD study with station planning for the KOP rail project. Mr. France also spoke about an initiative to establish passenger rail to Reading. A tri-county committee has been established to look at options for this rail expansion between Norristown and Reading.
7. The Montco 2040 Grant application period has ended. The grant review committee will review the applications and make recommendations to the County Commissioners. We anticipate the commissioners will announce the winners at their May 20th board meeting.
8. Scott France announced a virtual Planning Smarter Event for April 29th at 4:00 called Happy Trails! Planning and Designing Trails for All Users. The event focus a new access and diversity awareness plan that looks to promote equity on our county trails.
9. There are two upcoming PMPEI planning courses Building a Strong Planning Commission on April 22nd and The Limits to Zoning on May 27th. These courses will be held virtually and have a focus of Montgomery County communities.
10. Mr. France provided an update of The Norristown Stormwater Advisory Committee. The Norristown Municipal Council recently approved the implementation of a Stormwater Utility Project to address local flooding, sinkholes, stormwater drains and sewers. They hired consultants and implemented a committee which includes Drew Shaw.
11. Abington Township has established a Local Climate Action Plan committee. Jon Leshner will serve and represent the county. Mr. Leshner is also working with DEP on a countywide climate action plan.
12. Jon Leshner is working with regional partners in a solar energy agreement. This would be a regional cost purchasing plan to supplement county energy with renewable energy produced in PA.
13. The Farm Board recognized Jonathan Rinde with a resolution, he resigned after 27 years of service. John Corkum will serve as Chair and Brett Altman as vice Chair. The Farm Board will move forward with the 2021 round of farmland preservation.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:45.

The next Board meeting will be on May 12, 2021 at 9:00 AM