BOROUGH OF WEST READING
PLANNING COMMISSION
SEPTEMBER 6, 2023

The West Reading Planning Commission met for their regular meeting on Wednesday, September 6, 2023, at 6:00 p.m. at Borough Hall with the following persons present: Chair Philip Wert; Vice Chair Christopher Lincoln; Members James Keller, Cody Rhoads, Daniel Horman; Zoning Officer and Code Department Manager Chad Moyer; Borough Manager Dean Murray; and Borough Secretary Cynthia Madeira. Members Jennifer Bressler, Kacie Rodriguez and Zanna Leiendecker were unable to attend.

Visitors

Mark Evans, Derck & Edson, LLC
Maureen Hasty, Resident
Stephen Price, Attorney
Steve Ware, Derck & Edson, LLC
Michael Rohrer, Systems Design Engineering, Inc.
Melvin Acevedo, Resident

Mr. Wert called the meeting to order at 5:59 p.m.

Public Comment

There were no public comments.

Approval of Minutes

Motion to approve the August 2, 2023 minutes. **Moved** by Mr. Lincoln and seconded by Mr. Horman. **Motion carried 5-0.**

New Business

a. **Conditional Use Application – 101 Franklin Street –** Mr. Rohrer shared his review of Mel's Auto Service, LLC Conditional Use Application for an existing storage and HVAC business to be converted to an auto repair business. The property is in the Light Industrial District (LI) as well as the Commercial and Industrial Redevelopment Overlay District. The property lot size is 0.08 acres, which contains a two story, semi-detached dwelling with an attached garage. The attached garage was most recently used for an HVAC business, with accessory storage. The property has limited off-street parking. The space will be utilized for automotive repair, state inspections and emissions with an accessory use of an office for insurance and public notary services. There are no proposed construction modifications for this change of use request.

   Section 455-97.H of the Zoning Ordinance allows motor vehicle sales and service by conditional use. Based on adjacent properties and other properties within the 100 block of Franklin Street, the proposed use is similar in appearance and not out of character of the neighborhood or existing zoning district.

   The applicant has not provided any information regarding off-street parking. Based on the photos submitted with the application it appears that the detached garage and rear driveway would allow a maximum of two off-street parking spaces. The applicant cannot provide an off-street loading space based on the lot size and building location.

   Section 455-140 of the Zoning Ordinance requires:

   - Residences – Two spaces per single family dwelling units.
   - Office, Professional, or Public Buildings – One space for each two occupants or employees working on the premises, plus one space for every 500 square feet of floor space.
   - Motor Vehicle Repair Garages – Three spaces for each vehicle lift or service bay, plus one space for each employee, plus parking space for all vehicles used directly in the conduct of business.

Section 455-139.I of the Zoning Ordinance states, "None of the off-street parking or loading facilities as required in this chapter shall be required for any existing building or use not now conforming to these requirements, unless said building or use shall be expanded. In this case, the provisions of this chapter shall apply only to that portion of the building or use so expanded. However, if the expansion is 25% or more of the existing building size, enough parking for all the building area (existing and proposed) must be provided per the requirements of this chapter." Mr. Rohrer recommended that the applicant provide details of the previous business use, so a determination can be made whether the new, proposed use is an expansion.

Section 455-139.N of the Zoning Ordinance states that off-street parking spaces required for a principal use may be located on off-street property other than that lot occupied by the principal use, as long as such spaces lie within 300 feet walking distance of the principal use. Mr. Rohrer recommended that the applicant consider other property locations to assist in providing off-street parking.

The applicant should demonstrate compliance with the following:

- The use conforms with the goals, objectives, and policies of the Berks County and Borough's Comprehensive Plans.
- The emission of smoke, dust, fumes, gases, odors, mists, vapors, pollens, and similar matter, or any combination thereof, which can cause any damage to human or animal health, to vegetation or to property, or which can cause any soiling or staining of persons or property at the point beyond the lot line of the use creating the emission, is prohibited (Section 455-111.B).
- Any operation producing glare and/or heat shall be performed within an enclosed building or in such a manner as not to be visible or to produce any effect beyond the property line of the lot on which the operation is located (Section 455-111.D).
- The use shall not adversely impact the general neighborhood relative to problems such as light pollution and noise.
- The use will not result in a greater impact than would normally result from other permitted uses in the same zoning district.
- The use shall not greatly affect the character of the neighborhood, nor the health and safety of the residents.

Mr. Lincoln inquired as to whether an auto repair use would be considered a new use from an HVAC use. Mr. Acevedo's Attorney, Mr. Price, indicated that they do not wish to take issue with parking requirements. Most of the properties in the area are owned by John Pakradooni and Mr. Acevedo and his wife reside on the property and plan to operate the business. There are no additional employees, and Mr. Pakradooni has agreed to provide three off-street parking spaces next door. Two spaces are available in the driveway and two spaces are available inside the garage that has a hydraulic lift. The building will not be expanded, signage will remain minimal and there will be no bodywork performed. Mr. Price indicated that the lease information will be provided to Borough Council at the time of the hearing.

Mr. Wert noted that reasonable conditions and safeguards could be required for things such as lighting, noise, parking, and hours of operation. Mr. Wert inquired as to future growth plans and the hiring of additional staff. Mr. Acevedo indicated that he would move to a larger location at that time.

Motion to recommend Borough Council to approve the Conditional Use Application for 101 Franklin Street while establishing a condition of prohibiting the use of on-street parking for customer vehicles. **Moved** by Mr. Lincoln and seconded by Mr. Keller. **Motion carried 5-0.**

Mr. Rohrer, Mr. Price, and Mr. Acevedo departed the meeting at 6:13 p.m.

Mr. Moyer indicated that the hearing may be held on September 26, 2023, prior to the budget meeting.

b. **Zoning Update – Form Based Codes** – Mr. Evans shared slides from their visit yesterday and the 2020 Master Plan and survey findings as a starting point. Aspects of the Institutional District adjacent to Delaney Circle were discussed. Mr. Wert noted a recent amendment to this area that included an overlay to provide flexibility in use. Mr. Evans noted plans to take a break in meeting monthly in November to allow time to write ordinances. The sign ordinance amendments will follow the same path.

Mr. Evans noted an interruption to the flow of retail space on the north side of the Fifth and Penn Avenue intersection by a gas station and parking lot and asked if the Planning Commission's strategic goal would be to provide continuity of the storefront experience and encourage storefronts to be located near the public sidewalk. Commission members agreed. Mr. Evans shared that the land use code legend does not designate mixed use and encouraged a policy of mixed use that is properly incentivized. The current zoning limitations to upper floor residential square footages were recommended to be allowed to occupy the entire footprint of the structure. Based on the occupancy level of the business district being high, it was recommended to extend the business district along Fifth, Sixth and Reading Avenues as a policy objective. Commission members agreed.

Establishment of zones of retail, transition, and residential districts were encouraged. Street wall presence was discussed to avoid blank walls to expand pedestrian oriented sidewalks. The four recommendations of the Master Plan were recapped:

- Re-envision the shopping center to encourage pedestrian activity.
- Cherry and Court Street encouragement of an even stronger example of the mural art walk experience.
- Re-envision the chocolate district (1st, 2nd, and 3rd Avenue area) to rebuild or transform.
- Re-envision the Reading Avenue and Buttonwood Street area for better connectivity to shopping, trails, river, and bicycling connectivity to the Borough of Wyomissing.

Commission members agreed to the four goals. The 700 block of Reading Avenue was encouraged to evolve into a commercial area with retail on the first floor and residential uses above. Redevelopment of the shopping center was thought best to encourage first floor retail fronting Penn Avenue with second and third floor parking in the rear.

There has not been any indication provided as to whether R.M. Palmer intends to rebuild. Mr. Moyer shared that it was portrayed to him that the owners do not intend to rebuild building #2 that was leveled.

The concept of a civic space in the vicinity of Delaney Circle was discussed and found favorable by the Commission. Mr. Evans requested the Commission to review the Master Plan objectives to ensure the goals are appropriate. Mr. Wert reported that the Master Plan has been adopted by Borough Council and can be considered an acceptable policy moving forward.

Existing condition analyses of front and side yard setbacks, building widths, and lot widths in each district will be established as historically favorable conditions, except for instances such as drive-through restaurants and extended front yard setbacks. It was noted that answers within the Master Plan Survey indicated a preference to bring building access within the 700 block of Reading Avenue closer to the public sidewalk. The example of 299 Penn Avenue was also preferred to be located closer to the street if realistic based on the existing grade. Mr. Evans noted an extraordinary number of buildings in the Borough that do not face the street and recommended focusing on the public realm. Two- or three-story buildings were found most desirable in the survey as well as public gathering spaces. Traffic calming strategies such as lighted crosswalks were recommended. Land use category

preferences in the business district were entertainment, live music, theater, grocery, and specialty shops.

Mr. Keller departed the meeting at 7:14 p.m.

Mr. Evans recommended adopting a regulating plan to define the placement of storefronts, civic spaces, trails and active frontages or ground floor activity. Standards should be established for building height and form and parking encouraged in the rear. It was thought that the uses could be more generalized to avoid the need to manage conditional uses for changes in use from say an HVAC to auto repair use. Mr. Moyer and Mr. Wert shared their preference of more defined regulations to be proactive as opposed to reactive.

Mr. Evans indicated that a few dollars were allocated within their scope of work to include parking standards that may need to be tweaked to possibly offer bedroom driven parking counts as opposed to unit counts.

Mr. Ware shared his fieldwork progress to document the existing signage to build a form that would be appropriate to the building. He noted a number of existing definitions for signs and the importance of differentiating between signs and artwork. A visual example of placement will be provided within the code. Commission members agreed to discourage light box signage.

Mr. Moyer inquired as to potential pushback from the community by creating additional pre-existing non-conformities. Mr. Evans encouraged transparency and educating community members that would encourage future appropriate new investments. Mr. Moyer indicated that lot coverage should be reviewed for conformity and MS4 improvements and noted that the added parking requirements conflict with lot coverage. Mr. Evans noted that the Borough is unique in that there are minimal public parking opportunities. Appropriate incentives should be provided for off-site and shared parking opportunities with stormwater management under the lots.

Policy choices will be provided for review and comment next month.

Mr. Evans and Mr. Ware departed the meeting at 7:52 p.m.

c. **Mechanical Equipment Yard Placement –** Mr. Moyer shared information provided by Mr. Kaag on shielding mechanical equipment. It is acceptable to shield the equipment with a minimum of one-foot clearance, however, it was recommended to maintain a two-to-three-foot clearance for maintenance purposes. Shielding is not detrimental to the unit and in some cases can be beneficial to shield the unit from dirt and/or sunlight to operate more efficiently. There are limitations to the allowable distance between the condenser and the HVAC unit that are established by the manufacturer. Should a unit need to be installed at the front or side of the home, shielding or screening of the unit should be required. To deter new unnecessary front of home installations the proposed language should limit the replacement to the same location with the same size and capacity, and no closer to the property line than the old equipment. Mr. Moyer will provide additional language for consideration next month.

The remaining agenda items were tabled until next month.

Adjournment
The meeting was adjourned at 8:04 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Cynthia Madeira
Borough Secretary