

**BOROUGH OF WEST READING
PLANNING COMMISSION
OCTOBER 4, 2023**

The West Reading Planning Commission met for their regular meeting on Wednesday, October 4, 2023, at 6:00 p.m. at Borough Hall with the following persons present: Chair Philip Wert; Vice Chair Christopher Lincoln (arrived at 6:20 p.m.); Members Cody Rhoads, Daniel Horman, Kacie Rodriguez and Zanna Leiendecker; Zoning Officer and Code Department Manager Chad Moyer; Borough Manager Dean Murray; and Borough Secretary Cynthia Madeira. Members James Keller and Jennifer Bressler were unable to attend.

Visitors

Mark Evans, Derck & Edson, LLC
James Rogers, Resident

Steve Ware, Derck & Edson, LLC

Mr. Wert called the meeting to order at 6:00 p.m.

Public Comment

Mr. Rogers spoke of a property on Pine Street that was purchased and sold seven months later for a profit of roughly \$40,000 without any improvements. It was noted that roughly 25% of single-family homes across the country are being purchased by investors and the difficulty this is causing for the average family to purchase homes. Mr. Evans recommended for financial stability purposes to consider allowing accessory dwelling units in the Borough.

Approval of Minutes

Motion to approve the September 6, 2023 minutes. **Moved** by Ms. Leiendecker and seconded by Ms. Rodriguez. **Motion carried 6-0.**

New Business

- a. **Zoning Update – Form Based Codes – Session 2** – Mr. Evans noted that this meeting is month two of eight sessions. Task two is understanding and defining building scale and form of street frontages as well as a signage discussion later in the meeting with Mr. Ware.

Mr. Evans shared an overview of the six topics for discussion this evening:

- Definition recommendations that would be helpful in form-based codes in the public realm.
- Zoning district boundaries that already exist as a starting point to control use.
- Regulating plan that defines the different types of street frontages in the Borough and the establishment of forms by zoning district.
- Site frontages (the area between the curb and the face of the building) will be the main focus this evening of the scale, form, and building placement.
- Frontage types by district.
- Sign types and definitions.

Definitions:

The definition of Active Frontage was recommended to promote visibility and activity in the areas facing the public. Industrial districts that do not impact the public realm would not need to be a focus area.

The definition of Build To Line to establish a parallel line or lot line where a building should be placed.

Mr. Lincoln joined the meeting at 6:20 p.m.

The definition of Civic Space to possibly incentivize private property owners that are immediately adjacent to a public frontage to create an outdoor open space area dedicated to civic activities to make the streets more welcoming.

The term of Frontage would encourage a mid-block pedestrian walkway between two lots for land that abuts a thoroughfare, civic space, or other public right-of-way.

Frontage Primary that would ensure the good parts of the building are facing the public street.

Frontage Private would be the area between the building façade and the shared lot line between the public right-of-way and the private lot that would establish a semi-public realm.

The definition of Stepback would be the upper portion of a building stepping back from an exterior wall to reduce its height and appearance from the street. A cornice line could be established to control the ultimate building level.

Zoning Districts:

The base zoning map was reviewed, without overlays, focusing on the Central and General Business Districts, Residential Professional, Light Industrial, and portions of the Institutional District to determine if any use control changes or mapping changes would be warranted. Commission members were comfortable with the current zoning map and district uses. Mr. Evans noted the vastly different building forms and heights in any given district and recommended refining the forms.

Regulating Plan:

Maximum and minimum building height regulations were recommended such as the requirement of the Central Business District structures to be a minimum of two stories with the ability to establish a faux second story appearance. A Build To Line was recommended with an available flex zone to allow placement to be in relation to neighboring structures.

Requirement of the façade to be located within a Façade Zone would require a minimum percentage of the front and side walls to be located within the Façade Zone.

Site Frontages:

The existing main street frontage types that are located within five feet of the curb line could be found in the 400 and 500 blocks of Penn Avenue. The existing main street transition frontages that are located within fifteen feet of the curb line can be found in the 600 and 700 blocks of Penn Avenue, and possibly the 700 block of Reading Avenue to encourage storefronts. The neighborhood professional frontages that are located within ten feet of the curb line could allow porches or storefronts to provide flexibility in use. The unification of Reading Avenue and Buttonwood Street was classified as a commercial frontage street experience with an existing six foot minimum to twenty-one-foot maximum distance to the curb line. These varied building relationships to the street could be transformed into one experience to expand the business district. Gateway frontage in the 200 block of Penn Avenue and Franklin and Chestnut Street that have major topographic changes or an industrial area that would require more flexibility. Service frontages are the rear lanes where garages and parking are needed and is where landscape standards should prevail. Encouragement of appropriate minor landscaping with hedging and edgings would define the edge of the public realm. Frontage scaling's were highlighted in their individual classifications as to façade zones, building height, dimensions, and setbacks.

It was noted that the potential of the Buttonwood Street and Reading Avenue area is not fully realized. Mr. Evans suggested establishing thresholds for improvements that would require

adherence to form-based codes. Parking creativity is needed, Mr. Evans encouraged ideas such as shared or offsite parking arrangements.

Mr. Evans recommended considering the 700 block of Reading Avenue as a main street transition block with the same regulations as the 600 and 700 blocks of Penn Avenue. This is one block where the north and south sides of the block are not unified and would not have matching standards. It was recommended that the 400 and 500 blocks of Penn Avenue have the same main street frontage standards. Main street transition standards could apply to the 400 and 700 blocks of Penn Avenue.

Frontage Types by District:

Service and gateway frontages would not require a façade zone. Neighborhood professional frontage would require a 60% frontage occupancy for the traditional townhome. The commercial frontage would be Reading Avenue and Buttonwood Street that would require a 40% frontage occupancy to improve the frontages. Measurement of the depth of the building from the right-of-way is more plausible than the curb line based on the varied distances of the individual streets. Main street frontage would require an 80% frontage occupancy, and main street transition would require a 70% frontage occupancy.

Ms. Leiendecker appreciated the form-based code flexibility to create interest as opposed to cookie-cutter type regulations. Mr. Wert agreed that the hybrid form-based code allows more flexibility by not stipulating things such as material use.

Mr. Evans inquired about a point of contact at the Borough to work with General Code for the ability to include graphics that would allow the regulations to be read more cohesively.

It was recommended to convert open grassy areas to an inviting gathering place and connection to public art murals and businesses.

Sign Types and Definitions:

Mr. Ware noted his review of signs in relation to form as opposed to zoning district and provided a definition of mural to better differentiate a sign from a mural. It was recommended to include a definition section for the roughly thirty sign definitions within the sign ordinance as opposed to the general zoning definitions for ease of reference. A list of additional definitions was provided and recommended to be consolidated with the existing sign definitions for possible replacement. A grid would then be established with individual criteria definitions by the form district for user friendliness.

An example of a wide variety of sign types were viewed such as the marquees, graphics, wall signs, and projected signs as well as the classic lighted box signs within the main street frontage area. It was noted that individual letters with individual lighting or gooseneck lighting would be preferable to the outdated lighted box signs. A variety of sign types within the main street transition frontage area were viewed noting the projecting, awning, freestanding, wall sign, and decorative canopy signs that are well done. The busy proportion of glass windows to sign aggregate was noted to be considered art by a previous zoning officer. A variety of commercial frontage signs were viewed noting the wall, freestanding monument, and pylon signs that were found to be acceptable for this district. Service frontage signs that would identify a second point of access from Cherry Street would be helpful.

Gateway frontage signs were discussed that included plans to repaint and possibly illuminate the railroad bridge. Mr. Evans inquired as to how a painted sign on a bridge would be regulated. Private or partially private owned land placement of a district type sign may be allowed by municipal

exemption. Mr. Moyer noted that this would fall under the billboards or off premises sign section. It was noted that the banners and transportation signs along Penn Avenue are not currently regulated.

The philosophy of regulating signs in relation to form as opposed to zoning district were found to be acceptable provided there are different regulations for home occupation type signage.

Mr. Evans appreciated the feedback that has been provided to create a clear focus on how to move forward. In roughly three weeks a new draft will be provided for next month's discussion.

Adjournment

A motion was made to adjourn the meeting at 7:55 p.m. by Ms. Leiendecker and seconded by Ms. Rodriguez. **Motion carried 6-0.**

Respectfully submitted,

Cynthia Madeira
Borough Secretary