

WESTTOWN TOWNSHIP PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES

Stokes Assembly Hall, 1039 Wilmington Pike
Wednesday, April 17, 2024 – 7:00 PM

Present

Commissioners Jack Embick (JE), Russ Hatton (RH), Jim Lees (JL), Brian Knaub (BK), Joseph Frisco (JF), and Kevin Flynn (KF) were present. Tom Sennett (TS) was absent. Also present was Interim Township Manager and Director of Planning & Zoning Mila Carter.

Call to Order and Pledge of Allegiance

Mr. Embick called the meeting to order at 7:06 PM.

Adoption of Agenda (RH/JL) 6-0

Mr. Hatton made a motion to adopt the agenda. Mr. Lees seconded. All were in favor of the motion.

Approval of Minutes (RH/JL) 6-0

Mr. Hatton made a motion to adopt the meeting minutes from April 3, 2024. Mr. Lees seconded. All were in favor of the motion.

Announcements

1. Mr. Hatton made the following announcements on behalf of the EAC:
 - a. The EAC will host an invasive plant removal in the Plumly Open Space on Saturday, April 20 and April 27, from 9 AM to 3 PM both days.
 - b. There will be a composting demonstration on May 4 from 10 AM to 12 PM at 1116 Chateau Drive.
2. Mr. Embick announced the United States Environment Protection Agency (EPA) enacted new drinking water standards under the Safe Drinking Water Act for Per- and Polyfluorinated Substances (PFAS) chemical substances, which may result in new monitoring and testing requirements.

Public Comment – Non Agenda Items

None.

New Business

1. Attainable and Affordable Housing

Mr. Embick explained that one of the implementation recommendations included in the Westtown Township Comprehensive Plan adopted in 2019 was to provide affordable and attainable housing options for the growing millennial and aging populations. Mr. Embick welcomed Chris Patriarca and Libby Horwitz from the Chester County Planning Commission (CCPC), and Dorothy Ives-Dewey and Ray Ott from the West Chester Area Affordable Housing Council. Mr. Patriarca summarized the role of the CCPC and recapped that the Township has endorsed Landscapes 3, the County's Comprehensive Plan, which seeks to balance growth and open space preservation. He further described Westtown's designation by the Plan as predominantly suburban landscape community with southwest corner and western portion of Crebilly designated rural and explained what these designations meant in terms of land use. Mr. Patriarca described Westtown as a predominantly residential community with low to medium density development patterns, limited commercial and retail options along Routes 3 and 202, and with significant areas of undeveloped open space.

Libby Horowitz summarized demographic trends and how they impact housing in the County and Westtown. She noted that the County has one of the fastest growing populations in the southeast, with projected growth increase by 30% by 2050. Ms. Horowitz also pointed out that there is a decrease of “nuclear families” and an increase of single or two person households. She believed it was driven by aging population and people choosing not to have kids or to have kids later in life. She stated that by 2034, older adults will exceed children for the first time in U.S. history, which will require a different type of housing with lower maintenance expectations. Ms. Horowitz also pointed out data results showing a decrease in house ownership among younger populations and an increase of the median housing prices and rents. She summarized that to accommodate new population growth and address the aspects of housing, the County needs over 50,000 new housing units. Ms. Horowitz shared that this significant growth can only be accommodated by single-family attached and multi-family units.

Dorothy Ives-Dewey summarized the history and organization of the Council which was formed in 2022 and its three main focus areas which are policy barriers, funding barriers, and outreach and education on the subject of attainable housing. She explained that the focus area are municipalities within the West Chester Area Council of Governments (WCACOG). She believed that we live in an area where housing is simply not affordable, with 27% of County households being cost burdened, paying more than 30% of their income on housing. Ms. Ives-Dewey pointed out that in places with opportunities for affordable housing, the waiting list is ten times the supply of available housing. She explained that affordable housing is for working poor, which are households at or below 60% of the area medium income (AMI), and essential workforce, who earn between 60 to 120% of the AMI. She emphasized that essential workforce are recent college graduates, teachers, emergency response personnel, and seniors. Ms. Ives-Dewey believed that attainable housing cannot be achieved in one municipality; it requires a collective regional approach. She quoted from Landscapes3 which recommended funding, regulatory, and organizational ways to facilitate construction of affordable housing. This can be achieved through zoning and permitting processes by allowing density bonuses, expedited permitting and reduced fees, reduced parking requirements, accessory dwelling units (ADUs), and additional allowable housing types.

Mr. Patriarca provided an overview of housing construction in Westtown where 173 new units were built since 2004, with a median sales price of more than \$500,000 (2017-2019). Mr. Flynn asked whether Sawmill development was included in the analysis. Mr. Patriarca stated that it was not. Ms. Horowitz further provided details on the A+ Homes initiative, which is implementation effort that focuses on creating homes that are attractive, affordably-priced, adaptable, aging-friendly, and accessible. She noted that more information about each one of these aspects is available online with guides, videos, and brochures. Mr. Patriarca summarized an analysis of Westtown’s zoning requirements pertaining to housing, and provided several recommendations. He believed that encouraging two-family and multifamily dwellings through zoning was something to consider. He also suggested allowing non-related persons to live in the ADUs, and creation of two or more dwelling units within an existing single-family detached dwelling. Mr. Patriarca thought that some recommendations were more suitable for adaptive reuse of historic properties. He offered considerations for inclusion of additional missing middle types in all zoning districts, review of planning processes, inclusion of a bonus for affordable housing, focus on starter homes, and amendments to existing standards. He added that grants for planning assistance and funding for affordable housing construction and initiatives are available through the County.

Mr. Knaub asked what specific suggestions would work for Westtown, given there is very little developable land left in Westtown coupled with the desire to preserve open space. Ms. Horowitz believed that looking at ADU requirements, ways to add to the existing housing stock, and encouraging smaller units would be beneficial. Mr. Patriarca suggested analyzing

the areas of the Township that might be suitable for this type of housing and drafting requirements to encourage that. Ms. Horowitz also suggested considering a pre-approved house design that does not need to go through a traditional approval process, to minimize cost. Mr. Flynn asked if there is a large migrant population in the County over the last two years. Ms. Horowitz replied there has been a Southeast Asian influx in concentrated areas of the County.

Mr. Flynn stated that developable land in Westtown is constrained by the lack of sewer infrastructure and larger lots are needed to accommodate onsite septic systems. He also pointed out that due to land development, construction, and other related costs, one can't build a house and sell it for a profit in Westtown unless it sells for more than \$850,000. Mr. Flynn also believed that assessing housing affordability on 30% threshold was not a correct figure and thought it was more like 40%. Mr. Flynn did not think it was appropriate for Westtown to change regulations allowing detached smaller units to be located on the same lot, as he thought it was a way of bypassing subdivision ordinance. Mr. Lees commented that the cost of the affordable housing program was a problem and that assistance in a solution should be coming from higher up. He also suggested that Westtown might not be the right place due to land costs.

Mr. Hatton suggested focusing efforts on public transportation to improve access affordable housing. He noted that there were no bus stops along Route 202 in Westtown, and the West Chester train station does not connect the surrounding areas. Mr. Hatton believed that access to public transit and affordable housing went hand in hand. He also brought up that no developer would be enticed to build more affordable housing units, because demandis for bigger and nicer homes.

Mr. Frisco believed that such housing should have been implemented 25 years ago before the land prices, taxes, and interest rates have increased. He also pointed out that people move to Chester County because it is a desirable place to live where your house is expected to appreciate in value. Mr. Frisco wondered the impact of attainable housing on house values. Mr. Patriarca stressed the importance of working on a regional level to determine the appropriate placement of housing options, recognizing that there might be locations not supportive of this effort unless costs can be somehow addressed.

Mr. Embick summarized that Westtown could consider changes to zoning that might foster attainable housing on a case by case basis, but felt that the more successful approach is through a private-public partnership. He envisioned the Township either supporting another organization or acquiring the land for construction of housing with controlled costs.

Ms. Carter pointed out that there has been an increase in permit applications for ADUs and suggested that permitting some type of ADUs by right might be beneficial. She noted that tiny homes have not been a trend in Westtown, but requests for temporary parking of Recreational Vehicles (RVs) by relatives have increased.

Public Comment

Mr. Foster, Chair of the Board of Supervisors, commented that although a worthy cause, the reality is that Westtown does not have enough vacant land and suggested focusing efforts on evaluating building codes to encourage long term living arrangements for the elderly who are choosing to stay in their current homes. He noted that Westtown has the best mix of a family type of bedroom community, with prevalence of single-family detached homes. Mr. Foster did not believe there would be any more apartment complexes built in Westtown. He also noted that even though mixed use development seemed to be like a great idea, their potential location has always been an issue. Mr. Embick agreed that providing for attainable housing was difficult to make any substantial progress on unless there is some sort of a creative way to address it.

Old Business

1. Official Map – Continued Discussion

Mr. Embick asked the members if they preferred to dive into the Official Map discussion or table it until the next meeting. The Commission agreed to table the agenda item until later date.

Reports

1. Mr. Frisco made the BOS report from the April 15 meeting.
2. Mr. Hatton made the EAC report from the March 26 meeting.

Adjournment (RH/JL) 6-0

The meeting was adjourned at 9:04 PM.

Respectfully submitted,
Mila Carter
Planning Commission Secretary

DRAFT