

Economic Development Task Force – Citizens Committee

Set into Motion

Background/Introduction

In 2014, the Lower Saucon Township Economic Development Task Force created the following Vision Statement for long-term economic development in the Township:

Lower Saucon Township will support existing businesses and institutions while developing future opportunities through managed growth that reflects the Township's heritage.

A series of short-term tasks were developed for implementation of the plan.

One task was the appointment of a Citizens Committee to work with Township staff to review Township policy and permitting procedures. The goal was to insure that Lower Saucon is perceived as a “user-friendly” township for appropriate development. Thirteen knowledgeable Township residents volunteered to serve on the Committee.

Several other tasks involved planning work to be undertaken by Boucher & James as follows:

- Re-examine zoning districts, permitted uses, and area and dimensional requirements
- Parcel inventory to determine highest and best uses as well as maximum development potential
- Use utility base mapping to determine areas with public sewer and water that are best suitable for Development

These tasks were completed through a grant from the Northampton County Department of Community and Economic Development.

The Citizens Committee met a total of five times during 2015. Zoning Officer Chris Garges thoroughly briefed us on current Township ordinances and processes, as well as federal, state, and county regulations affecting economic development.

A survey was conducted, first with the Committee members and then online with residents and developers (generating 48 responses), to determine current perceptions about the processes, costs, and turnaround time for permitting in the Township. The Township got generally high marks and the verbatim comments identified some areas for streamlining and improvement.

We also met with three experts in economic development to get their input:

John Landis, Chair of the LST Planning Commission
Scott Mease, Project Engineer
Andrew Warner, Developer and LST resident

We then submitted our individual thoughts and ideas for enhanced economic development in the Township to the Zoning Officer. Our consolidated recommendations were reviewed at a meeting on September 30, 2015.

Our recommendations, based on our detailed study of existing policies and procedures and the planning information that was presented, are summarized in this report.

Policy

1. In an effort to streamline the approval process for applicants and foster economic development, the Committee recommends the formation of a Planning / Zoning Project Review Committee consisting of two Council members, two Planning Commission members, the Township Planner & the Township Zoning Officer. The makeup of such a committee would provide valuable input from staff, professionals, elected and appointed officials at an early stage in a development. The Committee recommends the following guidelines for such a committee:
 - a. The committee would be available to meet monthly should there be business.
 - b. The committee would be utilized for large projects in the early stages of development.
 - c. The committee would be somewhat “informal” in a manner that would encourage owners and developers to utilize the committee as a resource.
 - d. Submission to and discussion by the committee would not be required
 - e. The committee would serve as a public relations tool to attract economic development.
 - f. Council members of the committee would report back to Council on a monthly basis (if there is business)
2. The Committee recommends that Council move toward preparing marketing documents such as a brochure, webpage or a video, which would highlight the Township commitment to economic development and the benefits our Township has to offer.
3. In an effort to reduce time and costs for what equates to mostly Township residents, the Committee would like the Township to evaluate the designation of a single consultant (planner or engineer) to review minor subdivision, minor land developments and lot line adjustments. The Committee envisions that the Township Engineer would still be responsible for stormwater reviews which would apply to some of the applications per the Township’s current stormwater management ordinance.

Procedural

1. Council should investigate the feasibility of paying their consultants (Hanover or Boucher & James) on a “per application” basis on minor projects in lieu of hourly billing. The intent would be to incentivize timely, concise reviews of minor subdivisions and land developments and minimize the number of review iterations.
2. The Committee would like the Township to consider reducing submission deadlines / timeframes if feasible recognizing that various Township related agencies also review the applications (Police Department, Public Works, etc).

3. In an effort to accelerate the development process and reduce costs to developers, Council should consider assigning a staff member (possibly a Public Works employee) to perform or accompany the Township Engineer with dedication / acceptance inspections of land developments to determine true needs for punch lists.
4. The Committee recommends that Council consider requiring their Subdivision and Land Development review consultants attempt to contact applicants or plan preparers who are receiving a letter with comments about or additional requirements for their project prior to issuing a formal letter. The common goal is to ensure that assumptions, nuances or ambiguities can be communicated in the early stages of the project and the time and cost of the review would be minimized.
5. The Township currently utilizes third party building inspectors to enforce the Pennsylvania Uniform Construction Code. The Committee recommends that Council consider suggesting that the agencies (currently two of them) make every effort to utilize the same inspector throughout a given job or project in an effort to provide efficiency and consistency to the resident or client.

Zoning Map Amendments

The following zoning map amendments have been recommended based on the Township's desire for sensible economic growth. The following three areas look to expand commercially zoned areas in the Township that have limited or previously disturbed environmental resources, proximity to water and sewer, and appropriate roadway frontage.

1. Multiple parcels across from Giant Shopping Center on Route 412 / Leithsville Road (From R-12 to GB-1).

It is recommended that Council examine rezoning the area currently zoned as R-12, across from the Giant Shopping Center on Leithsville Road / Route 412, to GB-1. This area would expand the already existing commercial corridor that leads into Hellertown Borough and eventually to Route 78 and Bethlehem. The R-12 zoning in this corridor was examined during the Task III study completed by Boucher & James in June of 2015. It was determined that due to the proximity of commercial zoning (GB-1 across the street), frontage on Route 412, and limited environmental constraints that this area would be an excellent candidate for rezoning. Utilities are provided to the development/shopping center across the street but would require a partnership with the Authority to provide connections on the west side of Leithsville Road/Route 412.

2. Area north of Seidersville Road between Old Philadelphia Pike and Route 378 (From R-12 to VC).

It is recommended that Council consider rezoning a portion of the existing R-12 area north of Seidersville Road between Old Philadelphia Pike and Route 378 to be included within the adjacent Village Center zoning district. Due to the increasing expansion of commercial uses along the Route 378 corridor, the availability of utilities and existing building types on this lot, the Council may want to consider this expansion. While the topography of the site is a consideration, providing an opportunity for a unique commercial use is desirable.

3. Two parcels north of Route 78, south of Broadhead Court (from RA to O&L) and a large parcel on the Lehigh Campus (from R-20 to O&L).

It is recommended that the Council consider rezoning three parcels currently zoned RA and R-20 to O&L, which is the zoning on the adjacent parcels. This allows for a larger development potential in this area, which has proximity to Hellertown, Route 78, and the Lehigh Campus. There are natural resources on these parcels; however, it does not necessarily diminish the potential for some type of creative development partnership with Lehigh. Utilities are located in proximity to these parcels but would need to be expanded in order for these lots to be fully developed.

Zoning Ordinance Text Amendments

The following text amendment recommendations further encourage economic development through creative adaptations to the Township's zoning ordinance. The Task 2 Implementation memo prepared by Boucher & James in April 2105 included a number of suggestions such as these. The recommendations as presented by the Citizens Committee, in concept (actual test wording would follow), are as follows:

1. Review of Environmental Protection Standards in the General Business Districts to encourage infill and new commercial development.

Over the last ten-plus years, the Township has taken great strides to protect the environmental resources found within the Township. This includes open space preservation, riparian buffers, decreasing impervious surfaces, and new environmental resource protection standards. However, until recently, little has been done from a zoning ordinance perspective to encourage and promote economic development. There needs to be a balance given to both in order for the community to be sustainable.

The committee is asking Council to consider modified protection standards for the general business districts in the Township. This could include reducing the tree protection standards as well as steep slopes and potentially increasing the amount of allowable impervious surfaces. These simple modifications could be provided outright or in exchange for contribution to a "tree fund" or other environmental improvements elsewhere in the Township. This would allow the business districts to be more concentrated and fully developed with infill projects that might be unattainable with the current standards. Further, any proposed changes would continue to provide protection for those truly environmentally sensitive areas that are currently untouched by development.

We would further encourage the use of this technique to provide a more "business friendly" environment and promote development in areas that are most suitable for this type of intense development.

2. Expand or modify uses currently permitted in the GB2 zoning district

The GB2, Limited Business District, is designed for lots less than five acres in size and therefore has a limited number of permitted uses based on size and intensity. Changes to the uses in this district will need to consider circulation, access, and linkages / shared access.

- a. Consider the inclusion or revision of current permitted uses to allow small scale, convenience or destination based uses, such as coffee shops, bakeries, boutiques, breweries, frozen yogurt shop, shipping/UPS/copies, etc. These smaller-scaled businesses could even have a combination of uses such as a book store and coffee shop or restaurant and brewery. Consider permitting drive-thrus by conditional use to ensure that circulation is acceptable and appropriate on smaller lots.
- b. Small-scale, temperature controlled, indoor access storage facilities are becoming a desirable commodity in the business world. As files become digital and offices no longer need immediate access to paper files, storage units in proximity to business districts are desirable. These types of facilities are designed with the appearance of an office or professional building, having access to individual storage units from an interior hallway, unlike typical self-storage units. The conditional use process would be able to give the Township Council the ability to better control not only access and circulation issues but architectural features as well.

Review of other Township Documents

1. The Committee recommends the formation of a study committee including Township officials, Township Engineer and local private engineering consultants to review current Township stormwater regulations as they compare to adjoining municipalities, Lehigh Valley Planning Commission and NPDES regulations.
2. The Township's current Ground Source Heat Pump Ordinance was adopted in 2005. Council may wish to consider a review of Ground Source Heat Pump ordinance to bring it up to speed with current technology now that these units are more common.
3. The Committee discussed the current definition of impervious coverage as it relates to Stormwater and Zoning Density. Council should consider reviewing the definition of impervious coverage as it relates to materials and construction methods that are pervious by design. The definition should be evaluated with respect to the Township's Stormwater Management Ordinance and the Lehigh Valley Planning Commission's model ordinance, as well as current design practices.
4. The Citizens Committee, with input from staff, has also recommended revisiting the Township's Pennsylvania Sewage Facilities (Act 537) Plan. The plan has not been updated since the addition of utility lines to the Giant Shopping Center on Leithsville Road in 2001. There was discussion and minimal progress made in 2008 – 2011 regarding the expansion of sewer lines through the Hellertown Park. However, there has not been an overall update to the Plan to expand for economic development reasons.

Similar to the reasoning for the map and text amendments to the Zoning Ordinance, the Township should look to expand and promote the areas targeted for economic development. These include areas of low or disturbed environmental resources, availability of utilities, access, and market drivers. Many of these areas have been identified through the previous studies completed for the Economic Development Task Force by Boucher & James, specifically during Task 3. In identifying these concentrated areas for business development, the Township in turn, would protect those areas of sensitive environmental resources and create a unified, balanced, and sustainable community.

However, it is important to realize that the availability of utilities is an absolute need for economic development! By working with Hellertown Borough, the Authority, Saucon Valley Partnership, the Chamber, and local realtors and developers, the specific areas most suitable for this expansion can be identified and a plan to move forward can be created and implemented to the benefit of Lower Saucon and the Saucon Valley.

Next Steps

After Council's review and acceptance of this report, staff will prioritize a number of short-term, easily implemented changes to policies and procedures that are recommended in this report for Council approval and implementation in 2016.

Lower Saucon Township will look for 2 or 3 projects in 2016 that can become success stories for the Township's more active approach to economic development. At the appropriate time, marketing activities (website, brochures, etc.) can be undertaken to encourage new projects. Two communications are envisioned:

1. "How To" Do Business in LST;
2. Marketing materials to promote specific areas and/or projects.

Lehigh Valley Economic Development Corporation (LVEDC) has offered assistance in writing and distributing these materials.

A few members of the Citizens Committee will be asked to continue as volunteer "consultants" to Council and staff during 2016.

Full implementation of the 2014 Economic Development Task Force report will take five to ten years. The purpose of this report is to "Set Into Motion" those short-term tasks that will begin the process and continue the momentum for economic development that has been generated these past two years.

Respectfully submitted,

Lower Saucon Township Economic Development Citizens Committee
November 4, 2015

Members:

- Stephanie Weitzman
- Mike Lieberman
- Amanda Buss-Sivak

- Joel Katz*
- Joe Graziano
- Andrew Lauden
- Mark Walters
- Sandra Miller
- Mark Ironside / Erin Kintzer
- Lou Mahlman
- Charles Moretz
- Phillip Roeder
- Dave Spirk
- Dave Willard, Council Member (Chair)
- Jack Cahalan, Township Manager
- Chris Garges, Zoning Officer
- Judith Stern Goldstein, Township Planner

*Mr. Katz is recognized for his participation; however, he wished to note that he did not support all of the above recommendations.