

MINUTES

1. CALL TO ORDER

Chairman McKeon called the regular monthly meeting of the Berks County Planning Commission to order at 3:0 p.m. The meeting was held on Wednesday, August 12, 2020 as a virtual meeting using the platform Microsoft Teams.

The following members were present:

Thomas C. McKeon, Chair  
Jodi L. Gauker, Vice-Chair  
James A. Adams  
Glenn R. Knoblauch  
Douglas R. Myers, Secretary  
Lee C. Olsen, AIA, NCARB  
Barry L. Schlouch

Not in Attendance:

James C. McCarthy  
Douglas P. Rauch, Esq.

Also Attending:

J. Chadwick Schnee, Esq., First Asst. Solicitor  
Beth A. Burkovich, GISP, GIS Analyst  
Cheryl A. Auchenbach, Planner III  
Shanice E. Ellison, Planning Technician  
Michelle D. Franklin, Subdivision Planner III  
Michael D. Golembiewski, Trans. Modeler  
Devon B. Hain, Trans. Planner II  
David N. Hunter, Sr., AICP, Executive Director  
Matthew F. McGough, Intergovernmental Planner  
Alan D. Piper, Transportation Planner III  
Ashley J. Showers, Assistant Director  
Amanda M. Timochenko, Planner II  
Pauline R. Klopp, Office Support IV  
Heather Berger, Berks County Information Systems  
Deb Millman, GRCA  
Elaine Schaefer, SRGA  
Robert Folwell, SRGA  
Julia Hurle, SRGA  
Scot Case, Responsible Sourcing Solutions, Ltd.  
Jeremy Zaborowski, Asst. Dir., BCIDA

2. PUBLIC COMMENT

There was no public comment.

3. REPORTS OF OFFICERS AND COMMITTEES

A. Executive Director's Report

Mr. Hunter informed the Commission that the Board of Commissioners has created the Reading Berks 2030 Economic Development Strategic Plan Task Force. He mentioned that a technical committee was formed which has already held their first meeting this past Monday, August 10<sup>th</sup>. He stated that this is a high-level group of planners/practitioners who have come together to put forth the parameters for an economic strategic plan for Reading and Berks County. This is a huge opportunity for both the City and County to work together to forge a union to come up with a unified strategy for economic development. Mr. Hunter and Mr. McKeon are on the committee as well as representatives from the City and GRCA. He mentioned that the meeting that was held on Monday was very successful. Meetings will continue to be held bi-weekly and the committee will be reporting to a larger Stakeholder's Committee later in the Fall. The Technical Committee will present recommendations to be adopted by the Stakeholder's Committee to ultimately retain a consultant.

Mr. Hunter mentioned that there is another group that is working in tandem with the Economic Development Strategic Plan Task Force and that is the Smart Growth Alliance (SGA). It is based on 10 smart growth principles from Smart Growth America. He stated that if anyone wanted to join the next virtual SGA meeting it is being held on September 23<sup>rd</sup> at 2:00 p.m.

4. CONSENT AGENDA

A. Approval of Minutes of June 10, 2020

B. DCED Grant Greenway, Trails and Recreation Program Grant Letter of Support – Schuylkill River Greenway Association, Schuylkill River Trail Reading to Hamburg Gap Feasibility Study

Berks County Planning Commission staff received a request from the Schuylkill River Greenway Association (SRGA) for a Letter of Support for SRGA's application for a \$55,000 grant from the PA Dept. of Community and Economic Development's Greenways, Trails and Recreation Program, to help fund the Schuylkill River Trail's Reading to Hamburg Gap Feasibility Study.

The 120-mile planned SRT is substantially complete for the 67 miles from Philadelphia to Reading. This Study is a crucial step in expanding the trail north from Reading toward Schuylkill County. The final alignment is expected to potentially run through nine (9) different municipalities, as follows: The City of Reading; Muhlenberg, Bern, Ontelaunee, Perry and Windsor Townships; and Leesport, Shoemakersville and Hamburg Boroughs.

The Feasibility Study will be completed by a professional design consultant. The consultant will review previous studies and alignments, conduct site visits to identify opportunities and

challenges and will identify the best and most practical alignment for the SRT. The consultant will facilitate Steering Committee and Public meetings to seek input from residents and inform the public of the ongoing trail plans. They will prepare cost estimates and write the final report. In addition to establishing the trail alignment and cost estimates, the robust public involvement and planning process will build crucial community support for the completion of the SRT in Northern Berks County.

### **Findings**

1. The Feasibility Study will be conducted by a professional design consultant. It will be completed in 10 months from the time all funding has been secured.
2. The Study is estimated to cost ~\$70,000. SRGA is requesting \$55,000;
  - a. The SRGA will be providing \$7,500 toward the required \$15,000 Local Match;
  - b. By Resolution (259.2020) of the Berks County Commissioners (July 30, 2020), a letter of support from the Board of Commissioners was sent and the Commissioners pledged \$7,500 toward the SRGA's \$15,000 local match;
3. The proposed Feasibility Study and the resultant SRT completion are consistent with the policies expressed in:
  - *Berks County Comprehensive Plan 2030 Update* (January 2020), promoting the completion of the SRT for its transportation, recreation, cultural and economic benefits;
  - *Berks County Greenway, Park and Recreation Plan* (December 2007), calling for the completion of the SRT as the 'spine' of the County's greenway and trail systems; and
  - *Berks County Bicycle and Pedestrian Transportation Plan* (July 2020) that also calls for the completion of the SRT as the 'spine' of the County's bicycle and pedestrian networks that will further non-motorized transportation options, connectivity to communities and opportunities, and promote Active Transportation throughout the County.

Elaine Schaeffer, Executive Director of SRGA spoke about the study that they are seeking funding for. She mentioned that the section of the Schuylkill River Trail from Reading to Hamburg is one of the biggest and last gaps in the trail. She mentioned that the Feasibility Study is step one for this gap. Once funding is received, which will hopefully be this Fall, they will put together a Steering Committee who will put together an RFP and hire a consultant. Robert Folwell, SRGA, then spoke a bit about the costs of completing this section of the trail.

Staff prepared a Letter of Support for this project listing consistency with the Berks County Comprehensive Plan, Berks County Greenway, Park and Recreation Plan and the Berks County Bicycle and Pedestrian Transportation Plan.

### **C. Reports for Approval**

- Land Development & Subdivision Activity Report & Summary
- Endorsed Land Development & Subdivision Activity Report

MOTION: Lee Olsen made a motion to approve the consent agenda as presented. The motion was seconded by Jodi Gauker and passed unanimously.

### **5. STAFF REPORTS**

1. Ashley Showers – Leak-Goforth Build Out Analysis

Mrs. Showers mentioned that we are diving a little bit deeper into the four economic studies that have been done over the past 20 years because of the inconsistencies between them. The first study looked at was the Leak Go-Forth Study from June 2001. The development goal of the Leak-Goforth Study was 2,500 acres of developed business and industrial parks and sites that will accommodate 20 million square feet of industrial and office uses. Staff reviewed the 630 parcels within the 48 original sites identified in the study. Staff then determined what commercial and industrial development occurred on the sites between January 2001 through December 2019 as well as the square footage of that development. The results were that there were 2,175 acres of developed business and industrial parks which resulted in 13.9 million square feet. Whereas the development goals of the Leak-Goforth study have not completely been met, it has been very much implemented. Mrs. Showers also mentioned that staff's analysis went to December of 2019 and we are all aware that there are a lot of areas throughout the County that are adding industrial and commercial square footage as we speak.

Mr. Hunter then asked the Planning Commission if more should be done with the Leak-Goforth study. He then mentioned how Amazon is coming to Berks County and they did not choose a Leak-Goforth site. He said that this would be a discussion for the Economic Strategic Plan Technical Committee. He stated that he has reached out to Dan Fogarty at Workforce Development asking him for data on how many employees have been added to the industrial sector over the last 20 years.

Lee Olsen asked that if we thought the sites from the Leak-Goforth study were good sites twenty years ago, and the sites haven't changed and are still there, have business parameters or criteria for selection changed? He also asked if Berks County ever went out to trade shows letting the world know that Leak-Goforth says this is the place to go. Mr. McKeon stated that the implementation of the study led to the precursor of GRCA in a lot of ways. The conclusion, after interviewing site selectors across the Country was "Where is Berks County, and you guys need to do some marketing". That's when the Berks Economic Partnership (BEP) was established by the Board of Commissioners. BEP then went to the trade shows and were calling on the site selectors, which is still going on to this day through the work of GRCA.

Lee Olsen suggested asking Amazon why they didn't pick a Leak-Goforth site.

As to why Amazon picked the site that wasn't in the Leak-Goforth study, Mr. McKeon mentioned that that study was very aware of zoning and zoning changes. Sometimes what might happen is you're going to have developers who are going to locate a good site at an interchange and they will work to get the zoning changed or the municipality may come to the realization that they're going to get a lot of tax base by changing their zoning.

Barry Schlouch stated that he thinks the reason why Amazon chose the site they are going to is because of LERTA. He feels that LERTA is a game changer. He also mentioned that another game changer will be passenger rail. He mentioned that Berks County should work closely with Montgomery and Chester Counties to get passenger rail going. Mr. Hunter mentioned possibly having John Weidenhammer speak at a Planning Commission meeting about the passenger rail in the near future.

Mr. Hunter asked if anyone had any other comments to the presentation Mrs. Showers gave on the Leak Goforth Study because we would like to present it to the Smart Growth Alliance and the Economic Strategic Plan Technical Committee. Mr. Knoblauch suggested putting the Leak-Goforth study away and start focusing on the newly adopted Berks County Comprehensive Plan. He asked if the Amazon site was identified in the most recent Comprehensive Plan. Beth Burkovich answered that it was identified in the 2030 update of the Comprehensive Plan for the economic development areas.

Jim Adams agreed to put the Leak-Goforth study aside and use the current Comprehensive Plan. He is amazed at the results of the Leak-Goforth Study, but said it is time to move forward.

Jeremy Zaborowski asked what additional development do we have that is outside of the Leak-Goforth study? He also mentioned that if we are able to figure out any correlation to see if it involves political framework or infrastructure access then we might be able to do an in-house replication of the Leak-Goforth study to give us some ideas as we are developing out sites in the near future.

Deb Millman commented that the results of the Leak-Goforth should be touted publicly so people are aware that this study did not just sit on a shelf. Mr. Hunter mentioned that maybe our presentation could be given at a Commissioner's meeting so it can be broadcast out to the citizens of Berks County.

Mr. Hunter stated that he would love to contact Amazon to talk about site selection. He feels that it is worth sitting down with companies who are coming to Berks County to find out what they were looking for when relocating to a new area. He also stated that we want to use the Leak-Goforth Study as a launching pad for the 2030 Economic Strategy. He mentioned that we all seem to agree that the study was a success and that benchmarks were almost hit, and that we are going in the right direction.

Lee Olsen then reiterated Barry Schlouch's comment that there are financial vehicles that taxing authorities can implement to entice development to improve economic development such as LERTA and TIF. He mentioned that maybe those outlying boards, supervisors, and taxing authorities need to be given an ABC's of how it's done because other counties and cities have been taking advantage of those tax incentives. Mr. McKeon said prior to COVID, he and Paul Janssen discussed possibly talking to the municipalities about tax incentives.

6. ADJOURNMENT

MOTION: Mr. Adams made a motion to adjourn and the meeting adjourned at 4:13 p.m.

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Thomas C. McKeon, Chairman

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Douglas R. Myers, Secretary