

No new funding for Ardmore Transit Center

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By Cheryl Allison

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There will be no new infusion of federal dollars for Lower Merion's long-awaited Ardmore Transit Center project.

Township commissioners received that disappointing news Wednesday night, even as they were poised to extend an agreement with downtown development partner Dranoff Properties.

Uncertainty over the success of the township's application for the latest round of federal transportation grants known as TIGER IV was one of the reasons a new six-month extension, until Dec. 31, 2012, was recommended.



With the door to that source of funding now closed for any immediate help to narrow a daunting funding gap, the board voted to extend the contract all the same.

In breaking the news, Ardmore Commissioner Cheryl Gelber said the focus in the next months will be on PennDOT and Amtrak's recent interest and cooperation. That may be the best avenue to pursue to see if any project to upgrade facilities at the Ardmore Train Station and build a commuter parking garage on the current SEPTA lot can still move forward, she said.

The other option to be given renewed scrutiny as possibly the only affordable downtown revitalization project is a public-private partnership with Dranoff to build a mixed-use, retail-residential development on the township's Cricket Avenue parking lot.

That Ardmore would be picked for this latest round of TIGER (Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery) grants was always a relative longshot.

Township officials hoped, however, that with PennDOT as a new co-applicant, and with support from Lower Merion's federal elected officials, it might prevail.

Gelber noted that the U.S. Department of Transportation received more than 700 applications totaling \$10.2 billion in projects. It had just \$500 million available to award in 2012.

"We will work in the days and weeks ahead to determine how to move forward" without the grant, she said, including identifying "an acceptable, affordable Cricket Lot project," she said.

This week's action marks the sixth time the agreement with developer Carl Dranoff has been extended since his company was named the township's development partner in March 2008.

A township negotiating team has been working with him on negotiating terms of a revised agreement, as the potential scope of the project has changed and been scaled back with the funding picture.

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The township has twice before sought new federal funds, to add to the nearly \$6 million granted in late 2004 for a new Ardmore Transit Center to include a new train station with high-level, accessible platforms and other transit improvements, and new commuter and public parking.

Participation by a private developer, such as Dranoff, in building new residential and retail development to bolster the Lancaster Avenue business district was to be the other part of the revitalization initiative. His larger plans for more development near the train station have been shelved, as focus shifted to the Cricket Lot option.

In the new round of grants, it was hoped that the \$25 million might still make it possible to do some of the train station improvements and build a parking garage with more levels, to reduce the need for parking at the Cricket location.

While most of the initial \$6 million has been spent on required studies and design and engineering of the parking garage, the township also has been pledged \$15.5 million in state grants for a project, to be matched with private or other funds.

Commissioner Lewis Gould noted again this week that he was an early supporter – really the first – of transit-oriented development in Ardmore and worked with U.S. Rep. Jim Gerlach (R-Sixth District) to secure that first \$6 million.

As he has previously, he emphasized again this week that the driver of the project was to have been a new train station, and questioned whether the state funds can be used for another purpose. There were different opinions Wednesday night whether they might be used for public parking on Cricket or for a more general economic development purpose. Gelber asked for a report to answer those questions.

Gould's motions to extend the Dranoff agreement for just three months -- he reasoned that the funding picture is now clear -- or to state that this would be the final extension failed for lack of a second. The board then approved the six-month extension on an 11-1 vote, with Gould opposed. (Commissioners Steven Lindner and Brian Gordon were absent; Commissioner Jenny Brown had left the meeting before the vote.)

In the coming weeks, Gelber said a public meeting of the Ad Hoc Ardmore Committee would be scheduled to update the community on the Cricket Lot project and any potential project at the train station.

Dranoff was not present at Wednesday's meeting, but, in recommending the extension, she said credit had to be given to the developer for sticking with the project.

"The simple reality is if Carl Dranoff was not still in this game," an Ardmore project "would pretty much be moot," Commissioner Phil Rosenzweig agreed. "We need to give him an opportunity" in these next months "to show us what he can do," he said.

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