

## As closing nears, planning for Ardmore Cricket Lot redevelopment steps up

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With construction set to start on Ardmore's Cricket Avenue parking lot in as little as three months, plans for changes in the downtown during the process are still "a work in progress," but that is a good thing, Lower Merion Township officials say.

In a meeting with several dozen business owners and Ardmore residents Oct. 9, a township team said plans for temporary parking and other assistance continue to evolve as it receives feedback from the community. Those plans can and should also be updated and revised, it was stressed, during what is expected to be an 18-month construction period for the new mixed-use development the township is undertaking with partner Dranoff Properties.



And changes don't have to wait until the first shovel goes in the ground – possibly just after New Year's Day. At their meeting Oct. 15, Lower Merion commissioners were to consider and potentially adopt an ordinance to extend the one-way traffic restriction on Cricket Avenue to either West Athens Avenue or School Lane. The move is intended to free up a curb lane in at least a portion of the roadway for additional on-street parking. Cricket Avenue is currently one-way south from Lancaster Avenue to the entrance to the municipal lot at Cricket Terrace. If approved, the new restriction would take effect by December or earlier.

In an interview, Christine Vilardo, executive director of the Ardmore Initiative, said the business authority has been working in cooperation with the township for a number of months to address parking and other concerns of downtown businesses, voiced most recently by a newly-formed Cricket Business Community group.

Most significantly, Vilardo said Ardmore Initiative has received a commitment from Carl Dranoff, principal of Dranoff Properties, to provide nearly a quarter-million dollars for a business assistance fund. Working with local businesses, she said the funds could be used in a number of ways, from providing marketing and promotional support during the construction period, to bringing back her organization's popular Downtown Dollars program – reimagined as "Cricket Cash" – to more direct assistance.

Some of those same concerns were raised again at the meeting of the township's Ad Hoc Ardmore Committee Oct. 9, when township engineer Ed Pluciennik presented a revised temporary parking plan, updated to reflect earlier community comments and new information about traffic access and safety.

The Cricket Lot project, part of a downtown revitalization initiative that also includes improvements at the Ardmore Train Station, calls for Dranoff to redevelop the lot with a mixed-use building including 121 apartments and about 8,300 square feet of new street-level retail space. The complex will also include parking for the new residences and a three-level parking structure to replace and slightly increase public parking available on the site today. Dranoff has named the new development One Ardmore Place.

While the project has been touted as a springboard for economic development, bringing new residents who will also be shoppers and diners in the downtown, business owners on Cricket Avenue and

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Lancaster Avenue who depend on convenient parking in Ardmore's largest public lot, are frankly worried whether their businesses will survive the construction period.

The temporary parking plan takes a multi-pronged approach to identifying other parking spaces that can be made available during construction, looking at traffic circulation for possible changes like extending the one-way restriction on Cricket Avenue, relocating some township or employee parking, and offering valet parking or shuttle services.

A primary proposed change would convert spaces in several township permit lots to metered parking, while some on-street metered spaces could be added within an area close to businesses. Ardmore Initiative and the township have also been exploring options to rent some private parking lots in the downtown, where owners might be agreeable.

In addition, according to the updated plan, a number of longer-term (12-hour) meters in the Schaufele Plaza lot could be converted to two-hour meters. Addressing the need for convenient pick-up/drop off parking near businesses, the township is also considering converting several metered spaces on Cricket Avenue to 15-minute spaces. At the meeting, options to relocate a loading zone for truck deliveries on Cricket Avenue to optimize business parking were still being considered.

When plans were discussed earlier this year, it was thought that extending the one-way restriction in the area from Cricket Terrace to West Athens Avenue might allow for new parallel-parking spaces on the east side of Cricket Avenue. At last week's meeting, however, Pluciennik said an analysis determined that, because of construction staging along the Cricket Lot and the need to provide adequate space for emergency vehicle access through that area, no new on-street parking spaces can be added in that area. Several additional on-street spaces can be provided if the one-way restriction is extended to School Lane.

Still a matter of debate is an option to convert Cricket Terrace to one-way between Cricket Avenue and Rittenhouse Place. Some on-street parking might be gained, but residents on Cricket Terrace and an adjacent business have said the restriction would be a burden. Pluciennik said the township is not currently recommending making Cricket Terrace one-way.

On the other hand, he said the township has followed through on a suggestion to move police vehicles off its Athensville lot (behind stores on the north side of Lancaster Avenue), relocating them to the Bernicker Lot east of the Township Building on Thursday and Friday evenings and all day on Saturday and Sunday. That move has already freed up 28 public spaces.

While some of the temporary spaces may not be quite as close or convenient to the Cricket area businesses, the township's analysis determined that nearly as many – 606 compared to today's 641 – spaces in the study area could be available during Cricket Lot construction. That should be more than enough to accommodate peak demand, which was measured at 506 spaces currently.

While business owners still had questions, residents of neighborhoods abutting or close to the Cricket Lot – some of whose homes have no off-street parking – were also concerned. Most attention so far has been directed to protecting businesses, noted neighbor Mike Frank; more needs to be done to consider the impacts on residential neighbors.

Following the meeting, Vilardo, with Ardmore Initiative, said it was clear additional meetings will be needed to discuss those and other issues. As for the list of requests the Cricket Business Community submitted to the township a few weeks ago, however, she said it should be understood that Ardmore Initiative, the township and Dranoff Properties have been working for many months – both before crucial state grant funding for the public component of the program was temporarily withdrawn and since it was restored in early September – to address many of them.

The list of ideas to ease parking concerns, help businesses plan for changes in activity during

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construction, get the message out that Ardmore is open for business, and keep the downtown vital with special events and efforts to boost customer loyalty during what will be a challenging period, is long. Adequate and clear parking signage, abundant and varied marketing strategies, possible police assistance at the pedestrian crossing on Lancaster Avenue, helping businesses build up their social media and online presence, discounted "Cricket Cash" to create incentives to shop local, and many more are being considered or are already in the works, Vilardo said.

An important part of the effort will be to work with area residents to support the town. "The story we will tell is, these are not corporations, these (business owners) are human beings. It's the relationship between the businesses and their customers that needs to be nurtured," she explained.

One Ardmore Place may be the name Dranoff has chosen for his project, Vilardo said, but the name is significant in another way. She sees it as a challenge and an opportunity for township officials, businesses and community residents to work together. "Our whole approach," Vilardo said, "is, it's one Ardmore."

The temporary parking plan and update was to be presented to township commissioners at a meeting of the Economic Revitalization Committee Oct. 15, at approximately 7 p.m., at the Township Building, 75 E. Lancaster Ave., Ardmore.

The report is posted on the township's website at <http://www.lowermerion.org/Index.aspx?page=393>.

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