

Cricket Lot construction in Ardmore won't begin until after holidays

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By Cheryl Allison

The Lower Merion Township Board of Commissioners voted Oct. 15 to once again extend several key deadline dates in its agreement with Dranoff Properties for redevelopment of Ardmore's Cricket Avenue parking lot.

Most notably, it has moved back a deadline for construction of the mixed-use residential/retail project, which will also include a public parking structure, to March 31, 2015. Previously, construction was to start by the end of 2014.

Extended numerous times as the scope and nature of Dranoff's role in the much-delayed Ardmore Transit Center and downtown revitalization initiative has changed since his selection as the development partner in 2008, the latest change comes at the request of the Ardmore business community, board President Liz Rogan said.

The developer's team has submitted a final plan of land development for planning staff review, and has indicated it could start work sooner, Angela Murray, assistant director of community and economic development, said Wednesday. Downtown businesses, particularly those closest to the municipal lot, have asked that construction not get under way until after the holiday season, she said.

Construction still could begin as early as January or February, Murray said. But to allow for possible winter weather delays, the date is being set for the end of March. Several other benchmarks, including issues related for funding of the project, were also moved out to March 31.

The action came as several business owners spoke this week in response to an updated plan for temporary parking accommodations during what is expected to be about an 18-month construction period. At the board meeting, members of the Ard-Wood Civic Association also voiced continuing opposition to the Dranoff project, dubbed One Ardmore Place, saying that, at eight stories in some portions, it is out of scale and character with the existing business district and adjoining residential neighborhoods.

On the amended developer's agreement, Commissioner Jenny Brown questioned a checklist that indicated that confirmation has been received that Pennsylvania Redevelopment Assistance Capital Project (RACP) grant funds can be allocated to the Cricket project, in connection with the public parking component.

While the township received notification in early September from Secretary of the Budget Charles B. Zogby that \$10.5 million in RACP funds, \$1.5 million less than originally requested, was being made available for the project, after having been abruptly withdrawn last December, the township's special counsel for the Ardmore Transit Center, David Skolnick, acknowledged that the step should not have been marked "complete." A signed grant agreement between the Office of Budget and the Redevelopment Authority of Montgomery County, which would transmit the funds, has been requested but not yet received, Skolnick said. The deadline to receive confirmation was then extended to March 31.

In comments at the meeting, Christine Vilardo, executive director of downtown business authority The Ardmore Initiative, said a delay in construction until after the holidays "is appreciated," and in fact, some businesses that depend on close, convenient parking would like to see it move back a little farther, until winter weather eases. She and other business owners urged the township to begin implementing

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elements of the parking plan as soon as possible, for a smoother transition to parking changes.

Vilardo also asked the township, specifically, to do what it could to ensure that construction on the Cricket Lot and for SEPTA's planned improvements to the Ardmore Train Station don't overlap.

"My livelihood is on the line here," said Kohs, who has in the past spoken about the long-term benefits of Dranoff's project as a spark for revitalization of the downtown. "Convenience is what people need in the suburbs," she said, urging the township to find as many opportunities as possible to making parking available in the immediate vicinity of the Cricket Lot.

Representatives of the Ard-Wood Civic Association continued to criticize the Dranoff plan, and the township's much-maligned MUST (Mixed-Use Special Transit) zoning overlay that makes its height, density and reduced parking requirements possible. "Build a three- or four-story structure . . . and all of this [opposition] would go away," said the civic's vice president, Jesse Roche..

As for the parking plan, another member of the organization, Margo Borrell, pointed out that residents have been given little time to evaluate its options, since the document was not made widely available until last Friday. While officials tout the "dynamic," "fluid" nature of the plan, residents are less comfortable with it as a "work in progress," and feel their concerns are largely an afterthought to those of businesses, Borrell said.

Commissioner Cheryl Gelber, who chairs the Ad Hoc Ardmore Committee, noted that no vote on the parking plan was on the agenda this week. Commissioner Steven Lindner, who has voted in opposition to the Cricket Lot development plan, suggested it will, in fact, be in residents' and businesses' interests to keep the plan flexible and adjust it as the construction process moves forward.

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