

‘Rally for Ardmore’ set to protest Cricket Lot project

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Is it too late to alter or stop planned redevelopment on Ardmore’s Cricket Avenue parking lot?

Some Ardmore residents and business owners say that is the message they are hearing from Lower Merion officials as they have continued to raise objections at township meetings this fall.

Unwilling to accept that answer and what they see as a majority of their elected representatives turning a deaf ear to concerns, a group has called for a “Rally for Ardmore” this Saturday, Nov. 1.

At 3:30 p.m., they plan to meet in front of the Township Building on Lancaster Avenue for what one organizer called “a ‘60s-style protest.”

For anyone who has followed the decade-long saga of the township’s Ardmore revitalization initiative, it may be a scene from times past. Posters have gone up in some downtown store windows and protestors will be marching with signs, hoping to attract attention – and honks of approval – from motorists passing by.

Ten years ago, the signs blasted a potential eminent domain grab to support redevelopment in the historic downtown, focused on a new Ardmore Transit Center at the train station.

That threat was removed with a significant changing of the guard on the board of commissioners, while a train station-centered plan were set back by a lack of funding and other constraints.

With the shift of focus to a mixed-use project with development partner Dranoff Properties on Cricket Avenue, however, rally organizers say the threat to the character of the town could be just as great.

The push for a rally comes from two sources. ArdWood Civic Association, which has continued to question the Cricket Lot plans since a notice of restored state grant funding revived the project in September, is taking the lead, said its vice president, Jesse Roche in an interview this week.

Owners of some businesses that depend on Cricket Lot parking, including Maria Love of Gymboree on Lancaster Avenue, are joining in. Love said they are concerned not only about temporary loss of convenient parking and other inconveniences of 18 months of construction, but ongoing impacts of such a massive project.

Dranoff’s One Ardmore Place development will include 121 apartments and some new street-level retail space, enclosing a public parking structure to replace and slightly increase the number of existing surface parking spaces.

The complex, which will nearly cover the lot, will stand at four stories on Cricket Avenue, but rise to the equivalent of more than eight stories to the rear and adjacent to some existing homes on West Athens Avenue.

“I’m hoping just to make people aware. People don’t really get what’s happening,” Love said of the purpose of Saturday’s public protest. “It leads from no parking for existing businesses to a whole other aspect that people need to pay attention to.”

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Roche said those other impacts spring from a project that is fundamentally out of scale and character with the traditional downtown and Ardmore neighborhoods.

"This isn't a fight over parking or [location of] a loading dock. This is a fight over out-of-scale development," he said – in part a product of the MUST (Mixed-Use Special Transit) District zoning that Lower Merion adopted to encourage revitalization and permitting greater density, taller building heights and such items as reduced parking requirements.

In particular, Roche said ArdWood Civic has opposed the revision to MUST that allows the Dranoff project to rise to more than 90 feet.

"We've been told it's only eight stories at the back. That's like being told you're only a little bit pregnant," he said. "We've been told you'll get used to it, but will we have to get used to the next one and the next one?"

Another response has been, Roche added, that such height and mass is "essential to commercial viability." "It's not necessarily linked," he maintained, citing communities such as Chestnut Hill and Wayne that have lower height limits and thrive. "We're not opposed to four stories" as a reasonable limit, he said.

Finally, Love and Roche both said there is frustration that community members are not being given opportunities to evaluate plans like a temporary parking plan that seem to change at the last minute. In general, a majority of the board of commissioners is proceeding in the face, they say, of "overwhelming" community opposition.

ArdWood and other local civics wrote to Gov. Tom Corbett's administration, when it had withdrawn \$12 million in requested Redevelopment Assistance Capital Project (RACP) grants for One Ardmore Place last December. They want state funding to be directed to a fully-public project, including a parking garage, at the Ardmore Train Station as a top priority.

After the bulk of funding at \$10.5 million was restored – with lobbying by township and Montgomery County leaders and Dranoff – Roche noted that a board majority also recently voted to extend several deadlines in the developer's agreement with Dranoff. A prime purpose, it should be said, was to move the start of construction back until after the holiday season, at business owners' request, but the township acknowledged that it does not have confirmation yet that the grant will be allocated through the county redevelopment authority.

Roche said that could have been another opportunity to take a new look at the project and the board's continued support.

"If they were to put it out to a public vote, there's no way eight stories would be approved," he suggests. "How can they in good conscience vote in favor?"

In the event of heavy rain Saturday, the rally will be postponed to Nov. 8.

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