

Protest of Ardmore Cricket Lot development draws 90

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By Cheryl Allison

Defying a chilly rain, a crowd of nearly 90 turned out Saturday afternoon for a "Rally for Ardmore" in front of the Lower Merion Township Building.

Ardmore residents and owners of several businesses that depend on the township's Cricket Avenue parking lot staged the protest, opposing Lower Merion's project with developer Dranoff Properties for an eight-story, mixed-use residential and retail complex on the site.

Joining the group were Lower Merion Commissioners Lewis Gould, Jenny Brown and Brian Gordon and state Rep. Greg Vitali (D-166th), whose district includes the Cricket Lot and nearby neighborhoods.

"What do we want? No eight stories," the group chanted. "Slow this thing down now."

Groundbreaking and a start of construction on the project, dubbed One Ardmore Place, are expected in early 2015. Its 121 apartments and about 8,000 square feet of new retail street level retail space will be wrapped around a parking structure to replace and slightly increase existing surface parking in the lot.

Regina Melchiorre Brown, president of ArdWood Civic Association, which organized the rally, said it opposes the project as out of scale and character with Ardmore's historic downtown and traditional neighborhoods. The group, with two other area civics, had written to Gov. Tom Corbett's administration to urge redirecting state grant funds to long-awaited improvements including a parking garage at the Ardmore Train Station, after the funding was abruptly yanked last December.

In September, however, the township received notice that \$10.5 million in Pennsylvania Redevelopment Assistance Capital Project (RACP) funds were restored, breathing new life into the project. While SEPTA has stepped up to move forward a project for station improvements and Lower Merion still hopes to find funding for the garage there, Dranoff's project has been supported by a majority of commissioners, downtown business authority Ardmore Initiative and others in the community as an immediate spark to revitalization in Ardmore, bringing new residents who will shop and dine in the downtown, with close access to the town's transit opportunities.

"We are not anti-development. We are anti-out-of-scale development," Brown said. She and others at the rally voiced other objections, including the use of public funds to support private development, traffic and parking impacts that will outlast the immediate challenges of an 18-month period of construction, including the blow it may deal to existing businesses, some of which may not survive.

Brown said ArdWood has taken part in the various township meetings over a number of years as the focus of revitalization shifted to the Cricket Avenue site. "Nothing we have done in the township-dictated process" of public participation "has gained any response," she said, leading to this weekend's demonstration.

Brown and Gould have voted in opposition to the Dranoff project plans at various steps, criticizing not only the township's process but, among other concerns, the devotion of public funds for a public parking component that will result in a couple dozen additional parking spaces in the downtown. Gordon has



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spoken often in opposition to raising building height limits out of proportion to traditional neighborhoods here and elsewhere in the township.

While the process is indeed far along, Brown told the crowd it does not have to conclude that the project "is a done deal." There are opportunities yet, both at the township and state level, to change course, she said. "You need to keep doing this. If I were you, I'd be here every day," she said.

"What else should we do?" called out one man in the crowd.

"I think you've got to, at all levels, let them know this is not what you want," said Vitali, who began raising concerns about the project at township meetings last spring, after hearing from constituents in this new part of his district, assigned with recent state redistricting. (The Haverford Township resident, who has held the seat for 21 years, faces a re-election challenge from Radnor Township's Sarah Armstrong, the Republican candidate, in Tuesday's General Election.) "You can't make this easy. My feeling is, up until the very second they start [construction], it's not over."

Rally organizers said they plan to stage a repeat of the protest next Saturday, Nov. 8, again beginning at 3:30 p.m. They also plan to launch an online petition in opposition to the project this week. Brown said they would continue to speak out at township meetings and are considering other action about which she said she was not authorized to speak at this time.

Pam Edmonds, a resident of St. Paul's Road not far from the planned development, listed some of the same concerns as others about project funding and the scale of Dranoff's proposed building, as well as questioning demand for more apartments, given vacancies in nearby complexes.

"I think development done well is fine," Edmonds said, citing a new apartment building nearby on East Athens Avenue. "This doesn't seem anything like development done well."

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