

Main Line Times 2014 Year in Review: Ardmore revitalization, LM busing, enrollment among top stories

Published: Wednesday, December 31, 2014
By Cheryl Allison and Richard Ilgenfritz

It was a year-long roller coaster ride for Lower Merion Township's partnership with Dranoff Properties to redevelop the Cricket Avenue parking lot, making Ardmore redevelopment the top story in 2014, but development at other key sites, a threat to another historic treasure, and a continuing dispute with Narberth Borough over safety at a shared intersection also made headlines throughout the year.

One Ardmore Place

In the wake of surprise notice last December that the Pennsylvania Office of Budget was withdrawing \$12 million in Redevelopment Assistance Capital Program grants for Dranoff Properties' One Ardmore Place, the developer and township officials moved quickly to demonstrate that the mixed-use project on the Cricket Avenue municipal lot was still in play. As Dranoff and state and local officials lobbied Gov. Tom Corbett's administration to reconsider, the board of commissioners approved a preliminary plan of land development for the apartment-retail-public parking complex in April.



Protesters against the 8-story Cricket Lot project gather in the rain in front of the Lower Merion Township Building in November. (Cheryl Allison photo)

Meanwhile, in a development thought to boost long-awaited improvements at the Ardmore Train Station, SEPTA stepped forward to take the lead, presenting a concept that includes construction of a new train station building, in addition to new high-level platforms and other accessibility improvements. Under the transit agency's management, hopes were raised that funding may eventually be found for construction of a new commuter and public parking garage at the station in a second phase of the station project.

The persistence paid off. Just after Labor Day, word came that Corbett was restoring \$10.5 million of the RACP funds for One Ardmore Place for the public parking and retail components. The focus of planning shifted to preparations for a possible 18-to-24 month construction period, to begin in early 2015, as owners of a number of businesses that depend on the parking lot pleaded for help to survive its shutdown.

By year's end, protest by some Ardmore residents that the project is out of scale and character with the traditional downtown surged as opponents crowded township meetings, wearing blue "Keep Cricket Lot 4 Ardmore" T-shirts. Despite the outcry, the board in final meetings of the year approved several agreements called for under an agreement with Dranoff. The debate likely is not over yet, however. Two additional agreements, related to operation and maintenance of the public parking at One Ardmore Place, were tabled until January. In addition, an appeal period is still open on Lower Merion's decision to vacate a "paper road" on the parking lot, an issue protesters had seized on as a potential obstacle to development.

St. Charles Borromeo Seminary

Evoking memories of the epic zoning battle over changes on Saint Joseph University's Maguire Campus in Merion, St. Charles Borromeo Seminary's plans to consolidate operations on its Upper Campus triggered a series of zoning hearings with testimony stretching over four nights from May to July. In September, the Lower Merion Zoning Hearing Board granted special exception approval, with conditions

Main Line Times 2014 Year in Review: Ardmore revitalization

MainLine Media News, December 31, 2014

page 2

limiting enrollment and attendance at special events.

A community group, the Coalition for Neighborhood Character and Quality, which had formed last year in response to the seminary's potential sale of 40 acres of the Lower Campus between Lancaster Avenue and East Wynnewood Road in Wynnewood, objected, seeing the consolidation as a precursor to redevelopment on the Lower Campus.

Also to support continuing the seminary's programs in its home of 181 years, the institution caused a stir in local art circles when it announced it would sell several portraits of priests by Philadelphia artist Thomas Eakins, a visitor there in the early 20th century.

By year's end, while a list of development proposals had reportedly been narrowed, the seminary had not announced a selection.

Narberth's no-left-turn ban

Also carrying over a dispute from 2013, Lower Merion Township and Narberth Borough continued to disagree over a solution to concerns about safety at the intersection of East Wynnewood Road and North Narberth Avenue, near the Narberth railroad tunnel. The township wants a traffic signal; borough officials support a roundabout as a more innovative and, they assert, safer alternative.

The debate took a detour in February, when Narberth Mayor Tom Grady ordered a left-turn prohibition from North Wynnewood onto East Wynnewood, surprising Lower Merion officials. Grady, who had witnessed an ambulance held up in the tunnel by left-turning traffic, imposed the restriction as a temporary public safety measure.

While that move led to questions about enforceability and worries about rerouted traffic, the ban remains. In November, the borough applied to PennDOT to make the restriction permanent; meanwhile the township has submitted plans to signalize the intersection, with no reported action by the transportation agency.

William Penn Inn

Reviving questions about Lower Merion Township's ability to protect some of its most historic properties, a developer's proposal to raze the 1799 William Penn Inn in Wynnewood prompted the strongest protest from historic preservation advocates since the loss of Bryn Mawr's grand La Ronda mansion in 2009. Rader Builders of Media submitted a plan in July to build five single-family houses where the early Lancaster Turnpike inn and tavern now stands.

For advocates like the Lower Merion Historical Society, the inn built by Quaker "renaissance man" Joseph Price, has unique importance. It has been suggested it may have been a haven for runaway slave in Price's time. In October, the Preservation Alliance of Greater Philadelphia placed it at the top of a short list of "Places to Save."

As 2014 ends, the developer has tabled its application, and there is optimism in the historic preservation community that the inn may be saved.

The continued risk for properties like the William Penn Inn led Lower Merion commissioners to meet this fall with its historic preservation advisory boards to consider new approaches to protecting the township's heritage, and in finalizing a 2015 budget, the board approved funds to update the township's Historic Resources Inventory.

Main Line Times 2014 Year in Review: Ardmore revitalization

MainLine Media News, December 31, 2014

page 3

Bala Village Zoning

Dormant for nearly four years while rezoning of other parts of the City Avenue corridor moved forward, an ordinance to create a new Bala Village zoning district moved forward quickly in late summer. At the time, community concern about the Lower Merion School District's interest in some commercial properties on Bala Avenue for a bus storage lot was reaching a crescendo. Bala Cynwyd commissioners had made it clear such a use did not fit the vision of rezoning, which was intended to encourage mixed-use, pedestrian- and transit-oriented development and redevelopment on and near Bala Avenue.

By voting in July to advertise the rezoning ordinance for public hearing in September, commissioners effectively shut the door to a bus storage facility as a permitted use. With generally favorable comment at the hearing, the board voted to adopt the ordinance, which affects commercial properties along Bala Avenue and in a stretch on City Avenue from Orchard Road in Merion to the Cynwyd Rail Line.

It establishes new height and density incentives and limits, along with design, streetscape and greening standards. Buildings of two to six stories in height are to be built closer to the street behind wider sidewalks, with parking to the rear.

In adopting the ordinance with unusual speed, the board acknowledged it might want to almost immediately consider some amendments. Among those asking for changes are Merion residents, who object to the potential height of buildings in the strip along City Avenue.

A key goal of rezoning is to foster revitalization in the Bala Avenue business district. A possible setback in those hopes was dealt in early December, however, when a major anchor of the business district since the 1920s, the Bala Theater, closed abruptly amid a legal dispute between the building owner and the theater operator.

More 2014 changes

The year saw redevelopment plans for some other key sites move forward in Lower Merion and Narberth. A development partnership, Main Line ReBuild, is moving ahead with residential conversions of three historic churches, the United Methodist Church of Narberth and the First Baptist Church of Ardmore and Gladwyne Methodist in Lower Merion, as well as Gladwyne's Odd Fellows Hall. A new condominium building is also to replace the former Main Line YMCA in Ardmore, while a new retail/office development will fill a gap on Lancaster Avenue in Bryn Mawr on the former Verizon lot. Suburban Square shopping center in Ardmore has floated plans to build a parking garage on its East Parking lot and add a new retail strip on Coulter Avenue.

With longtime Township Manager Douglas Cleland's retirement in January, Lower Merion saw a leadership change. In May, Ernie McNeely, manager of West Chester Borough for 27 years, was sworn in as the township's top administrator.

And in April, the Bryn Mawr Film Institute celebrated its success story of saving and reinventing a historic downtown movie palace, staging a grand reopening, after a 12-year, \$10 million campaign, with two new theaters.

LOWER MERION SCHOOL DISTRICT

High school choice zone, enrollment and bus parking

Controversy erupted in the summer of 2014 when it was learned that Lower Merion School officials considered purchasing property on Bala Avenue for bus parking.

Main Line Times 2014 Year in Review: Ardmore revitalization

MainLine Media News, December 31, 2014

page 4

The controversy over Bala Avenue was one part of a larger issue involving increased enrollment and the need to find additional bus parking. The Bala Avenue plan was killed after Lower Merion Township adopted zoning changes that prohibited bus parking in the area.

In September, Lower Merion's acting Superintendent Wagner Marseille announced that enrollment in Lower Merion's 10 public schools had topped 8,000 for the first time since the mid-1970s. The higher-than-expected enrollment already has forced the district to build additional classroom space at several of its schools.

The district also has begun discussions on adding classrooms at Lower Merion High School in the next couple of years. But by adding classrooms, officials say they have to remove the 24 buses parked at the Lower Merion site and find a new location to park them and another dozen or so they expect to add to the bus fleet over the next few years.

One remedy to park the three dozen buses has been the district's plans to add a parking deck at its Matsonsford Road facility. But since only about 20 buses can be added to the site, school officials are considering several other options. As of December the administration was considering adding parking to Harriton, relocating the administration to leased space or purchasing new sites on either Woodbine Avenue near Marywatersford Road or a second site on the 600 block of Righters Ferry Road.

Chris McGinley leaves Lower Merion School District

In February, Lower Merion School District Superintendent Chris McGinley announced that he is leaving the district at the end of the school year for a new position at Temple.

"It is with great respect and gratitude that I have informed the Board of School Directors of my intent to conclude my service as superintendent of schools for Lower Merion School District and accept a new position at Temple University, effective June 30, 2014," McGinley wrote in a letter to Lower Merion School District families when he made the announcement public.

Since leaving, Wagner Marseille, who had been the assistant superintendent for the previous year, has been the acting superintendent through the 2014-15 school year.

The board expects to name a new superintendent for the start of the 2015-16 school year.

source: www.mainlinemedianews.com