

DEPG wants to bring restaurants, retail, homes to Coatesville

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Developer wants support to seek grant for parking garage

By Kyle Carrozza, *Staff Writer, The Times*



COATESVILLE – DEPG Development introduced its plan to put 30,000 square feet of retail space, about 50 market rate apartments, and two restaurants at the intersection of Lincoln Highway and First Ave. during city council's Monday night meeting.

The presentation came as part of a public hearing in which DEPG asked for the city's sponsorship in pursuing a Chester County Revitalization Program grant that would help pay for a parking garage on the north side of Diamond Street to accommodate the \$21 million business plan.

Jim DePetris of DEPG said that his company has been active in West Chester and took part in the revitalization of Phoenixville. He said that studies have shown a market for the proposition. He said that restaurants in particular draw foot traffic to urban areas and can create a market for other businesses.

City council and residents showed their support for the plan with some residents saying that they hope it will be the first step in creating a prosperous city.

“As an 81-year old resident of Coatesville, I want to thank you and your team for what you’re doing,” said John Palowski.

In addition to the retail and restaurants themselves, Coleen Terry of ECON Partners said that the project would bring around two hundred construction jobs and create around 90 fulltime jobs. DEPG plans on breaking ground in Summer 2016.

In other city news, Coatesville will continue to run off of a modified 2014 budget for the month of March. Councilors are still trying to find the right balance of budget cuts, a tax increase, and money to be taken from the trust fund.

Interim City Manager Michael O’Rourke said that he has talked to some city council members individually, and he plans on talking to the rest in order to get an idea of what concessions council members are willing to make and not make. He called the budget the “most difficult I’ve ever worked on.”

Council will hold a budget workshop on Monday, March 2. O’Rourke said that using information from that meeting, he hopes to draft a budget that at least four council members—the amount needed for a majority—will vote to pass. Council member Arvilla Hunt said that the focus should be on developing a budget that all seven members can agree on.

Council also passed an ordinance revising the city’s zoning policies. The ordinance allows group homes in any zoning district of the city, thereby aligning city policy with state policy.

Council discussed the ordinance in a public hearing prior to Monday night’s regular council meeting.

O’Rourke and City Solicitor John Carnes emphasized that per state law, group homes are not to be treated differently from family homes, pointing out that many group homes house people with disabilities, a protected class under Pennsylvania law.

Some residents expressed concern for how group homes might affect property values. They also said that such policies allow Coatesville to become a “dumping ground” for the county.

“If I wanted to put a group home on Gay Street in West Chester, do you think there would be any backlash?” asked one resident.

Council also voted to create committees that will help to facilitate interactions between city council and the city’s departments.

Earlier this year, council came up with the idea to have liaisons that would work to address concerns in city departments. Monday night, they decided to create committees of at least two council members to work with each department.

Though they will still have committee positions to be filled, Monday's vote put Ed Simpson on the police department committee, Arvilla Hunt and Marie Lawson on the codes department, and Bill Shaw on finance.

O'Rourke said that having committees, rather than individual liaisons would be more consistent with city code. However, council member Ingrid Jones did not select a committee to serve on as she still had reservations about the endeavor.

Jones said that she believes that in order to properly serve as intermediaries, council members would have to possess education or experience qualifying them for committee positions. Lawson disagreed, saying that the committees are a means to obtain that education.

"We're elected officials. Therefore, we must educate ourselves," she said. "We need to be involved in what's going on in this city.

Councilors also discussed ways to welcome new businesses to the city and improve conditions for existing businesses.

Expanding on an idea presented by resident Joseph Leofski, they approved the creation of a welcoming committee that will contact businesses and developers that have shown interest in working in Coatesville. Exact procedures have not been worked out, but Council President Linda Lavender Norris said that the human aspect of meeting business owners will help to encourage people to invest in the city.

To help current businesses, Lawson said that she would like to see a beautification committee that will assist in downtown maintenance. She said that volunteers could help to beautify and repair the area.