



Planning board sounds off on council, rejects Seymour traffic study



LINDA MOSS/STAFF

Traffic engineer John Harter, left, and attorney Thomas Trautner Jr. were at Monday's Township Planning Board meeting on behalf of Pinnacle Cos. and Brookfield Properties.

By LINDA MOSS

moss@montclairlocal.news

The Montclair Planning Board on Monday night sounded off over the Township Council taking control of one major redevelopment project in town, and sent a traffic-impact study on a second project slated for Bloomfield Avenue back to the drawing board.

At a nearly five-hour-long meeting, outgoing Vice Chairman Jason DeSalvo and several of his fellow board members criticized the council for “fast-tracking” creation of a redevelopment plan for Lackawanna Plaza. That controversial mixed-use development is slated for the site of the shopping center that used to house a Pathmark, which is also home to a historic train station, at Bloomfield Avenue and Grove Street.

DeSalvo described the council's action as a “joke,” which if mishandled threatened to “bollix” traffic on Bloomfield Avenue.

In other action, the board also told the developer of the Seymour Street redevelopment, a mixed-use project with two buildings slated for the site adjacent to the Wellmont Theater, to revise and come up with additional data for its traffic-impact study for that site. According to testimony Tuesday, the project will increase traffic

on Bloomfield Avenue and surrounding streets such as Roosevelt Place and South Fullerton Avenue.

The board wants information on the impact of the traffic created by the project - which includes 200 apartments, retail space, and a 7-story parking garage with office space - on Sundays and when the Wellmont holds an event, information that hadn't been collected in the report presented Monday by traffic engineer John Harter. Harter did the study for Seymour Street's developers, Pinnacle Cos. of Montclair and Brookfield Properties of Manhattan.

The board also asked Harter for what Chair John Wynn described as a "Plan B" if a major traffic-improvement project that Essex County has planned for intersections along Bloomfield Avenue never gets executed. Harter's traffic study assumes that the changes that the county wants to make will in fact happen. But the county is depending on a federal grant of \$4 million to \$5 million to do the work, and its application hasn't been approved yet.

"What I'm not seeing is a Plan B, because everyone is relying on something that you don't have control over," Wynn said.



LINDA MOSS/STAFF

Aerial view of the Seymour Street redevelopment site.

Monday's meeting was a hearing on the site plan for the Seymour Street redevelopment, which was continued until July 17. But one resident brought up the Lackawanna Plaza project, proposed by Pinnacle and Hampshire Cos. of Morristown, during the public-comment portion of the session.

William Scott suggested that the board take a comprehensive look at the various projects in development in the township when it considered applications, not consider them piecemeal and in isolation. Scott also recommended that the board move some projects along more quickly, such as Lackawanna Plaza, which will bring a supermarket to replace the Pathmark that the Fourth Ward has been lacking since November 2015.

But DeSalvo quickly interjected, pointing out that the council had recently opted to take over the drafting of a redevelopment plan for Lackawanna Plaza, to speed up the process, and then have the board just review it within a tight timeframe.

The process the council has chosen means that there will be little study or public discussion of the Lackawanna plan, compared to the many hearings and public input the board would have held before drafting a redevelopment plan, according to DeSalvo.

"What I can say is the public cannot have its cake and eat it," he said. "If you want the exhaustive process that we're going through here [on Seymour Street], with numerous opportunities for public input, for thoughtful discussion, to hear all points - you cannot do that in 30 days through a referral process by the town council. That's a joke."

Wynn said that under the usual process, the planning board would have carefully vetted the Lackawanna redevelopment plan before it went to the council.

DeSalvo told Scott, "You want a grocery store and you want it fast, that's fine, but you don't get to discuss the nuances of traffic, you don't get to discuss which tree goes where, how much open space there is. You get your grocery store fast, and if it bollixes up Bloomfield Avenue, well you got your grocery store, fast."

Board member Martin Schwartz also commented on the "fast-track" route the council had taken.

"And if you don't like the way it [the Lackawanna Plaza redevelopment] looks, you feel there's too much volume, it destroys a historic site, tough," he said.

Carmel Loughman, another board member, told Scott, "You're making some very good points, but the council is where you should address them."

During the portion of the meeting devoted to the traffic study for Seymour Street, Harter said the new development will increase traffic by 3 1/2 percent on Bloomfield Avenue, and that the residential component of the project would generate 100 vehicular trips an hour, minus 12 trips to reflect residents who use public transportation, on weekday mornings.

The development will alleviate some traffic issues, he said. For example, the part of Seymour Street in front of the Wellmont will be permanently closed to create a public plaza, instead of just being closed part-time when the theater has an event, providing "predictability" for drivers, according to Harter.

He also said that as part of the improvements that the county is planning it will install a crosswalk and traffic light at the intersection of Seymour Street and Bloomfield Avenue, a dangerous section of the street for pedestrians to navigate now.

The county's other planned improvements, if it gets the federal grant it is seeking, include creating a left turn lane, with a left-turn signal, on South and North Willow streets where they intersect with Bloomfield Avenue, according to Gordon Meth, a traffic consultant for the county who also testified Tuesday. That area currently has a high incidence of traffic accidents, he said.

Data shows that in peak hours when the Seymour Street project is built traffic on Roosevelt Place will increase from 80 cars an hour to about 150 vehicles, according to Meth, which raised concerns from DeSalvo.

"I just want to make sure that we're not turning this into what is right now a residential street into a commercial street," DeSalvo said, adding that the original goal of permitting dense development in just certain areas of town "was to not negatively impact the residential nature of Montclair."

The county is also considering removing the traffic light on the corner of Glenridge and Bloomfield avenues, permitting only right turns at that corner, Harter and Meth told the board.

South Fullerton will be one of the development's three access points, prompting concern from board members

and residents who spoke up at the meeting. They said that traffic on that road by the entrance to the Crescent Deck already gets backed up as vehicles try to cross Bloomfield Avenue, and that it would be exacerbated by additional vehicles coming from the Seymour Street development.

Meth said that putting “don’t-block-the-box” striping in that part of South Fullerton could help address the problem.

Ultimately, Meth told the board, even if the county doesn’t get the federal funds for the Bloomfield Avenue improvements, the traffic study and its recommendations would still be acceptable with “just a few modifications.”