Philadelphia 2035 plans complete; CH leaders press for residential zoning overlay

Posted on November 2, 2018, updated on November 2, 2018, by Contributor

After over a decade of planning, the Philadelphia 2035 initiative was finally brought to a close with the completion of the Northwest District Plan. (Photo courtesy of Locus Partners)

by Diane M. Fiske

At 1:51 p.m. on Tuesday, Oct. 16, the 11-year process of trying to ascertain development plans for the 15 districts of the city was completed with the final vote by the Philadelphia Planning Commission on the Northwest District, which includes Chestnut Hill, Mt Airy and Germantown.

The assembled audience at the meeting room on the 18th floor of 1515 Arch Street clapped as Philadelphia 2035 was finally completed after many years of meetings and discussions. The Northwest District of the city was the last district in the city to be reviewed.

Ian Hegarty, director of the Northwest District Plan, thanked his colleagues at the city Planning Commission for their cooperation after the unanimous vote by the Planning Commission.

“I am pleased we have the final plan, and it was the work of the entire staff,” Hegarty said.
He said there were six months of public outreach as part of the discussion of the Northwest District plan, which ended in July and produced a “full spectrum of comments,” including the future of Germantown Avenue, planning for growth, the need for affordable housing and historic preservation and other items.

The idea is to make changes in the area where a projected 100,000 new residents will live by the year 2035

“There were even people commenting on dog congestion,” Hegarty said.

Hegarty added that there were recommendations for crosswalks and traffic signals and signals for pedestrians.

The recommendations will be published in one of the district books now in display outside the offices of the Planning Commission, showing recommendations for changes in each district. These books will then be displayed in area libraries.

Redevelopment of two Northwest areas – one at Germantown and Chelten avenues and another in the Wayne Avenue area – were the main recommendations of the Northwest District plan.

Other recommendations include increased street lighting, traffic controls and improvements in traffic control on Germantown Avenue.

This means that approved recommendations accumulated in the Northwest region in three public meetings that were sifted by the Planning Commission staff will be part of changes mandated by the City Charter that must be in effect by 2035.

Changes in zoning must go through City Council.

“Any change in zoning will have to be sent to City Council for their approval,” Hegarty said.

Other things that residents requested, in the three public meetings from January through June, included more neighborhood centers and affordable housing as well as neighborhood conservation Protecting the waterways and preservation were important topics.

During the special comment session for audience members, Anne McNiff, executive director of the Chestnut Hill Community Association, said she and others in the Chestnut Hill neighborhood were interested in advocating for a proposal to create a zoning overlay area in an area of Chestnut Hill. McNiff was joined by Chestnut Hill conservancy director Lori Salganicoff and Chestnut Hill Business District Director Philip Dawson.

That provision had been in a prior draft of the plan adopted by the Planning Commission but was then withdrawn, McNiff said.

That zoning, called RSD-C as proposed by the Chestnut Hill organizations, would increase the residential minimum lot size from 10,000 square feet to 20,000 for locations underserved by sewers, roads and other public utilities.

“In Chestnut Hill, that would principally be in locations west of St. Martins and Seminole Avenues, where the current average lot size is between two and five acres,” McNiff said.

“We urge the PCPC to work with its staff and community representatives to precisely identify where a combination of higher-density/mixed use zoning AND conservation-oriented tools like the RSD-C can be used in a way that benefit all Philadelphians.

Hegarty said the proposal will be many revisited in future Planning Commission meetings.

“This issue of a rezoning overlay can only be decided by City Council,” he said. “This type of issue is one of many in the districts that is being referred to future meetings.”

Diane Fiske is a Chestnut Hill resident. She writes about planning and architecture for the Philadelphia Inquirer.

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