



300 attend city meeting for Northwest planning process

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by Diane Fiske

An overflow crowd of more than 300 people came to the Lutheran Theological Seminary, 7301 Germantown Ave. in Mount Airy Monday night, Jan. 29, to participate in the first of three workshops to share information and learn what is needed to improve life in Northwest Philadelphia.

The workshop, sponsored by the Philadelphia City Planning Commission was scheduled to discuss the Upper Northwest District Plan, which is part of the city's larger Comprehensive Plan, Philadelphia 2035. Monday's meeting for the district that includes Chestnut Hill, Mt. Airy and Germantown is the last of 18 meetings and workshops for the city, divided into segments by the Planning Commission.

According to Ian Haggerty, the city planner in charge of the Upper Northwest Area District Plan, the turnout was "very satisfactory."

"I think the Northwest Area probably has one of the highest concentrations of neighborhood organizations and interest in planning in the city," he said.

Participants who arrived at the meeting at 6:30 p.m. were invited to help themselves to light refreshments and sit at tables for eight where maps of the district and crayons were placed on each table. An overflow of people who could not fit into the provided spaces was invited to work with planning staff members in the hall.

A Planning Commission staff member worked with each table to help participants fill out the map with the crayons. The participants were asked to show on the map what they considered to be assets and deficits of their area.

Haggerty, in his introduction, had listed the Upper Northwest as having a higher degree of education than most other areas in the city as well as more home ownership, with rates higher in Chestnut Hill and Mt. Airy, but comparatively less in Germantown. There is diversity of ethnicity in the area as well as a greater number of older residents, he said.

Attending the meeting was 8th District Councilwoman Cindy Bass who spoke briefly after the introduction and said she was there "to hear what people think and wanted to know what those who live in the neighborhood may want to improve their lives."

After the introduction, people sitting at the workshop at each table were first asked to list their favorite aspects of life in their community.

"This is a wonderful opportunity to learn about what people think may be done to improve the neighborhoods," said Shirley Hanson, a city planner and founder of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy, who sat at one of the tables.

Many others at the event spoke glowingly of Northwest Philadelphia and named its many assets.

Michael Hagen, an investor who lives in Germantown with his wife, said he loves Germantown "for its history and affordability." He said he had no kids yet, but hopes to stay in the area and raise a family.

Hakim Clark, a real estate developer, said he had "been in Germantown all my life and want to help it improve."

Schools are an asset to Leah Hood, who lives in Germantown on Duval Street. She said she was happy with the Linglebach School where her children go and wanted to help spur more interest in neighborhood improvement.

Elie-Antoine Atallah, a Chestnut Hill resident and architect, said he came to the meeting to see what people think of improvements that could be made to the Germantown Avenue historic district.

Everyone at most tables felt that the Wissahickon Park as well as other prominent green spaces in the area were Northwest Philadelphia's greatest assets. They also seemed to agree that transportation was great in the Northwest area and that the two regional railroads and the multitude of bus lines was an asset. Haggerty said the bus lines are used more frequently than the trains.

The next meeting will be March 26 at the field house of Germantown Friends School in Germantown, and the final meeting will be June 24 at the newly renovated Lovett Library in Mt. Airy. Everyone who signed in will receive email announcements of the next meetings.

According to Marty Gregorski, director of planning for the city, who visited each of the tables Monday night, there have been 17 other areas of the city that have had similar meetings. Fifteen of these have concluded with proposed plans.

The plans, when they are concluded, will be forwarded to the Planning Commission for a vote and then forwarded to City Council.

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