

The Tecce Tract
An Alternate Vision

Prepared by Friends of the Springfield Panhandle

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Summary

This position paper has been created as an alternate vision to an anticipated proposal by Mr. Fred Tecce and his associates to develop a 41 acre tract of land owned by Mr. Tecce and his sister, located in the Springfield panhandle. Written by the Friends of the Springfield Panhandle, it appeals to the elected and appointed representatives of Springfield Township to carefully consider the regional and local importance of maintaining the property as open space. It illustrates new opportunities for the property to serve an array of constituents, play a strategic role in the Montgomery County and Township planning processes, and preserve the environmental and historical benefits that the currently open land provides to the area.

The paper envisions the property being preserved as a park for passive uses such as walking, bicycling and equestrian activities. It highlights how the property can benefit the County's trail development efforts by providing a connection between Fairmount Park and the Schuylkill River Trail. It demonstrates how a park at that location will improve the quality of life for all who live in the Township and surrounding areas, and points out how a passive use park would be consistent with the Township's stated plan for the panhandle. Finally, the paper invites the Tecces to be a partner in creating this lasting resource, and respects their rights to derive a fair monetary value in exchange.

The paper also contains a starting point for how we can achieve this vision. We recognize that such an ambitious plan will require the support and active participation of County and Township governments, non-profit land stewardship organizations, and private citizens. It signals flexibility toward any approach, including potential zoning changes, that moves us as far as possible toward the goals expressed herein. Finally, the paper proposes several immediate steps to the Township Board of Commissioners and/or the Planning Commission, especially to work with FOSP and the Tecces toward a mutually agreeable outcome, and to take steps to ensure that we have the time to make our vision a reality.

Note:

The guide below explains certain terms that are used throughout the paper:

- "The property" – Refers to the 41 acre tract of land owned by the Tecces which is currently under consideration for development
- "The Tecces" – Refers to Mr. Fred Tecce and his sister, owners of the property
- "The panhandle" – Refers to the portion of Springfield Township located between Andorra Road and the Schuylkill River
- "FOSP" – Friends of the Springfield Panhandle
- "The County" – Montgomery County, PA
- "The Township" – Springfield Township, Montgomery County, PA
- "Passive use" park – Intended for low-intensity uses such as walking, jogging, and nature rather than "active" uses such as team sports

Introduction and Background Information

At the Township Planning Commission meeting on March 2 and April 6, 2004, Mr. Fred Tecce and his representatives presented preliminary plans to transform a 41 acre tract owned by Mr. Tecce and his sister into a planned, age-restricted (55+) residential community. The property occupies 41 acres in the Springfield panhandle which are largely open at this time. The property has street frontage along Ridge Pike to the south and Northwestern Avenue to the east. It contains several buildings including a barn near Ridge Pike and a large home toward the northwest corner. There were two plan versions, each showing three multi-story apartment buildings (32 units per building) in the area along the Ridge Pike; one plan proposed to occupy the remainder of the property with 114 townhouses and the other to build 64 detached homes. Mr. Tecce's representatives recognized that either plan would require a variance or change to the property's current AAA Cluster overlay designation, due to the nature of the housing and greatly increased density, compared with what is allowed by current regulations. The Planning Commission asked several questions regarding traffic, environmental and municipal impacts, and invited questions and comments from the citizens in attendance. The March 2nd presentation ended with a request from the Planning Commission for additional data about several of these issues. The April 6th presentation ended with an unfavorable overall opinion rendered by the Planning Commission. However it was clear that a formal proposal, as opposed to these informal ones, would be coming before the Township Board of Commissioners in the near future.

As part of the public deliberation process connected to the proposal, FOSP has developed an alternate plan – to transform the property into a park and open it to the public for the first time. We believe there are numerous reasons, based on service to the Region, Township, and surrounding communities, why this would be a better outcome for the property. As we conceived of the alternate use and developed a vision and preliminary plan to achieve this outcome, we focused on three specific goals:

- To capitalize on the property's unique potential to serve the Township and the surrounding region while preserving scant open space
- To find ways to provide Mr. Tecce and his sister with fair monetary value in exchange for helping to achieve our desired outcome
- To preserve the special, "rural" character of the panhandle

We believe strongly that the property offers a special opportunity to create a highly valuable open space park resource. We envision a "passive use" park offering Township residents and our neighbors a facility for walking, jogging, bicycling, equestrian activities and overall enjoyment of nature. Given the property's beauty and specific location, we should seize the chance to create a lasting resource that will improve the quality of life in the region for many years to come. To demonstrate why the property can serve the Township and region so effectively, we have organized our vision into four sections focused on specific benefits and rationales:

- The Regional Perspective
- The Community Perspective
- The Township Planning Perspective
- The Tecce Perspective (Our Consideration Thereof)

The Regional Perspective

From a regional perspective, the property is perfectly situated to provide a trail connector between Fairmount Park and the Schuylkill River Trail. Its key characteristic is that it borders Fairmount Park along Northwestern Avenue and Manor Road at the Ridge Pike intersection. The property could contain a safe, multi-use trail connecting these two points, ultimately linking Forbidden Drive (via the Andorra Natural Area) with the Schuylkill River Trail near its intersection with Manor Road. Without the property, the same connection could only be made by forcing walkers and cyclists to navigate heavily trafficked Ridge Pike between Northwestern Avenue and Manor Road.

Our vision fits perfectly with the efforts of the Montgomery County Planning Commission to expand the existing network of regional trails. Current efforts of the County include plans to establish a new trail to connect Forbidden Drive (at Northwestern Avenue) with the Morris Arboretum and areas beyond, all the way to Corson's Quarry. There are additional visions to connect to Ft. Washington State Park, a cross-county trail, and a trail along the abandoned rail line near Mill Road in Flourtown. If our vision for the property becomes real, it would complement these plans and eventually offer the possibility to hike or cycle from the virtual center of Springfield Township all the way to Manayunk or Valley Forge National Park, without ever facing the dangers of automobile traffic.

So the property is a key "puzzle piece" to an interconnected trail network that would bring tremendous benefit to our area.

The Community Perspective

We define "Community" as both Springfield Township and the other communities surrounding the panhandle, such as Andorra in Philadelphia and Miquon and Lafayette Hill in Whitemarsh Township. The vision's benefits from the community perspective focus on recreation, the environment, our historical assets, roadway aesthetics, and economy of management.

Recreationally, many people across Chestnut Hill, Andorra, Springfield and Whitemarsh would enjoy the relaxation and access to nature that such a park would offer. We believe there are direct connections between an area's recreational opportunities and the overall health and emotional well-being experienced by members of the surrounding communities. Transforming the property into a park would surely provide these benefits.

Environmentally, Fairmount Park and the Wissahickon would experience two primary benefits. First, because the property shares a border with Fairmount Park along Northwestern Avenue, the Andorra Natural Area would benefit by the extension of its wildlife habitat into a contiguous area. It is an accepted tenet of wildlife biology that extension of habitat (as opposed to the dedication of isolated areas similar in size) is the preferred way to support species health and variety. Second, the Wissahickon Creek would benefit from the permanent preservation of open land to promote storm water absorption. As we understand it, an outcome beneficial to the Wissahickon is very important right now due to some new regulatory issues and the Creeks' role as a source of drinking water.

From an historical perspective, transforming the property to a park offers the chance to protect the current context of several historical assets. The first items are the property's barn near Ridge Pike and the main house toward the Andorra Ridge. Others include the barn, corn crib and milk houses of the adjoining Schwarz property. We are encouraged that the township appears to be moving toward the passage of an ordinance protecting historic entities, because it demonstrates the township's appreciation of this issue. Keeping the property as a park can be an immediate way to put this anticipated ordinance to good use, while protecting both on-site and nearby historic assets.

Aesthetically, we have the opportunity to improve the views from the Ridge Avenue corridor and create a "gateway to Fairmount Park" from a highly accessible location. As motorists drive in either direction on Ridge Pike near Manor Road, imagine the aesthetic benefit of seeing a historic barn, grazing horses and open fields as an alternative to apartment buildings or more new homes. The property's location across from the new Ace Center golf course would allow it to be part of an open corridor as one leaves or enters Springfield Township via Ridge Pike. Equally important, the property's connection to the Andorra Natural Area would essentially create a "gateway to Fairmount Park," making the public more aware of the park and providing an easily reached access point.

Regarding economy of management, the property is perfectly situated to allow Springfield to develop a joint management plan with Whitemarsh Township and share the cost of its upkeep. There are two reasons why we think Whitemarsh would be likely to support this idea. The first is that their citizens would

benefit greatly from the existence of a park at this location. The second relates to Whitemarsh's role as first responder to fire or medical emergencies that occur in the panhandle. The requirements to support of a park would surely be less burdensome for their municipal personnel than the comparable demand that would arise from a new, residential population.

The Township Planning Perspective

The Township planning perspective addresses two specific areas concerning the responsibility of our elected and appointed representatives: 1) To enact plans that fairly allocate Township resources and will benefit the long-term health of the Township and 2) To make decisions that are consistent with the plans and ordinances already in place.

We strongly believe that transforming the property into a park supports the long-term health of the Township. In combination with the envisioned trail connections, it would draw Township residents toward Fairmount Park and provide access to a new natural resource. It would be one of the features that Springfield should want to build to make the Township competitive with others - able to draw new, vital residents who will then contribute to our social and economic well-being.

Transforming the property into a park would also address an acknowledged shortcoming in the allocation of Township resources – as cited on page 53 of the Township's Open Space and Environmental Resource Protection Plan, the panhandle between Wissahickon Creek and the southern border is designated as an "Unserved/Underserved Area." Indeed, while doing research for this letter, we were struck by the realization that the panhandle is the only section of the Township that does not have at least one park facility. We have the chance to change this imbalance, and at the same time benefit all Township residents. Panhandle residents would gain a nearby park; other Township residents would gain a new, beautiful facility in a section of the Township that has heretofore been inaccessible for public use purposes.

Use of the property as a park would also be consistent with the intent of the Board of Commissioners, as expressed by the Open Space plan cited above. The goals and objectives of that document include:

Goal: "Maximize Permanent Preservation of Remaining Open Space"

[Selected] Objectives:

- "Encourage creative site design that preserves open space"
- "Keep low density residential use throughout much of the panhandle area"

Goal: "Create a Coordinated Open Space Network"

[Selected] Objectives:

- "Connect Township open space wherever practical"
- "Explore open space linkage with other communities"

Goal: "Meet Open Space Needs"

[Selected] Objective:

- "Explore trail opportunities"

Goal: "Protect Scenic and Historic Resources"

[Selected] Objectives:

- "Preserve views of natural features and open space areas"
- "Encourage creative development that preserves views and historic structures"

All of the Goals and Objectives cited above can be found in Chapter 2 of the Township's Open Space and Environmental Resource Protection Plan. Additional key facts in the document supporting the creation of a park facility on the property are:

- Current and projected shortages of Township open space acreage (Figure 30)
- Designation of the area containing the property as targeted for Resource Conservation (Figure 36)

Overall, we believe that these points illustrate a rare and convincing opportunity for the Township to serve the needs of its citizens and accomplish its stated intentions, by working with us proactively to achieve the transformation of the property into a park facility.

The Tecce Perspective (Our Consideration Thereof)

We are focused on the need to consider the perspective of the Tecce's as we strive to achieve our vision, and recognize that cooperation between FOSP, the Tecce's and the Township will be critical to achieving our goals.

We respect the right of the Tecce's to derive fair monetary value from the property. By putting forward this vision, we are making a commitment to play a role in building a deal to deliver that value. The deal could have many elements including private funding, public funding, tax mechanisms, conservation easements, and more. We hope that the Board of Commissioners will be our partner in this effort. We also hope to enlist the support of several non-profit land stewardship organizations to help and guide the process. We recognize that we are at the starting point for building the coalition required to meet the financial objectives that our vision will require. We invite the active participation of the Tecces in this coalition.

Conclusion

We believe this paper delivers a compelling, multi-faceted argument for striving toward the creation of a passive use park on the Tecce property. It is the first version of a position that will be augmented, improved, and revised as the deliberation process unfolds. Secure in our knowledge that the Cluster AAA ordinance is the starting point, we are flexible – we would not consider any option, including a potential zoning variances, “off-limits” if they could prove corresponding benefits toward the goals expressed herein.

We intend to use this paper to communicate our vision, rally more people to our cause, enlist the participation of supporting organizations, and make our voice heard to the elected and appointed representatives of Springfield and adjacent communities.

As of today we have only one specific request for the Board of Commissioners:

1. Update the Township's Open Space and Environmental Resource Protection Plan to designate the Tecce property as a strategic entity with the “Highest” priority for preservation as open space.

If and when a formal proposal is given by the Tecces to the Board of Commissioners, we anticipate having several further requests:

2. Record the Friends of the Springfield Panhandle as an official party to any discussions, negotiations, or legal proceedings that may take place regarding the property.
3. Appoint one member from the Board of Commissioners and one member from the Planning Commission, to partner with FOSP and other interested parties in the effort to create a park facility on the property. Their roles would include, but not be limited to:
 - a. Advocating for the acquisition of required funding for land acquisition from State, County and Municipal sources
 - b. Facilitating the discussion process between the Tecces, FOSP, other Springfield citizens, other concerned Townships, and other concerned entities

- c. Investigating the possibility of temporary property tax relief for the Tecces in exchange for temporarily suspending the effort to develop the property
- 4. Deny any near-term request for zoning changes or variances that might be part of the proposal, especially those that might seek to allow increased overall density or ability to alter the natural features of the landscape.