



The Whitemarsh Vista

The Whitemarsh Township Residents Association Newsletter

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Keeping our promise to keep you informed

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New Open Space Financing Mechanism Being Explored

Area residents may soon have an unprecedented opportunity to help preserve open space. An innovative public financing mechanism being considered by Whitemarsh Township, the Montgomery County Redevelopment Authority, and the Colonial School District could direct a percentage of future real estate taxes toward the purchase and preservation of portions of Erdenheim Farm.

Called tax increment financing, or TIF, this funding mechanism has been traditionally used by municipalities to encourage redevelopment. The plan currently being considered for Whitemarsh

would use the TIF mechanism as a way to curb development by purchasing land – specifically, portions of Erdenheim Farm — and preserving it as open space.

Proposed initially as part of the Community Agreement signed by the developer of the Hill at Whitemarsh, the WTRA, and other community groups, the TIF would work in the following way: a TIF district would be created in the central part of the township, encompassing approximately 300 acres in and around the intersection of Flourtown and Thomas Roads. This area would include the future site of the Hill at Whitemarsh and two major tracts of Erdenheim Farm.

When construction of the Hill at Whitemarsh is completed (it is currently under review by the Township), it will generate additional real estate taxes – estimated at approximately \$1.1 million annually – above and beyond what is

currently being collected. These additional, or "incremental" tax revenues, would be directed toward paying off TIF bonds, which would be issued to help pay for the cost of acquiring the two farm tracts and preserving them as open space.

In a recent message distributed to parents and others about the TIF, School District President Marc Orlow said, "...it is important that we explore the benefits to the Colonial School District to use the program to limit residential area development in an area that is already becoming congested." In a recent article about the TIF in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Phil Wallis, president of the Natural Lands Trust, remarked on the historic precedent of the strategy: "To use [it] this way, where you're protecting the dual interests of economics and open space, I haven't seen before." (View full [article without graphics](#))

Court Directs Township to Reopen Quarry Hearings

On May 30, after considering the land use appeal brought by Highway Materials, Inc. (aka the DePaul Group) with regard to the Board of Supervisors' denial of its office complex plan for Quarry Hole #1 on Stenton Avenue, the Montgomery County Court of Common Pleas directed the Township to receive additional evidence from DePaul within the next 120 days (by September 28).

It is not clear at this time what additional evidence the DePaul Group may present, or what impact this may have on any final judgment regarding the Quarry. We will keep you informed as more details become available.

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The WTRA urges residents to support the TIF for the following reasons:

- § It would enable the preservation of up to 200 acres of beautiful, historic Erdenheim Farm as permanently protected open space.
- § The three taxing authorities would continue to receive tax revenues at the current level from the TIF district properties. No existing tax income would be lost.
- § By removing up to 200 acres from the possibility of residential development, it would enable the School District to substantially limit future demands on its system and control attendant capital costs.
- § Preserving the land would help reduce other future municipal burdens such as infrastructure improvements and public services that would be incurred if the farmland were developed.

§ If approved, the TIF would cover up to 65% of the total price for acquiring the open space, thus reducing the amount that would need to be raised from private and other public sources.

§ Keeping 200 acres of Erdenheim Farm undeveloped, i.e., not covered by impervious surfaces, would keep flooding from worsening in this already flood-prone area.

§ Although the farmland to be preserved lies within Whitmarsh, residents of all three townships that are part of the Colonial School District would benefit from the reduction in future burdens on the school system.

In late May, a committee was formed comprising representatives from the Township, the County, and Colonial School District to work out the structure of the proposed TIF. The committee is expected to complete its work late this summer, at which time the TIF will be presented to the three taxing authorities for approval.

Proposed Development to Align Plymouth & Flourtown Roads
In an unusual twist, a developer's plans to build townhouses at the intersection of Butler Pike and Flourtown Roads may actually help to improve traffic conditions in that area.

With the support of the County, local residents, and Plymouth and Whitmarsh Townships, Paone Development Company plans to shift Flourtown Road so that it directly meets Plymouth Road at Butler Pike, thus eliminating the notorious dogleg that is responsible for so much traffic congestion in that area.

To help defray the costs of the road shift, the County and the two townships have each agreed to contribute \$75,000. Paone will absorb the rest of the costs, estimated at \$330,000.

This proposed move has the support of residents because it will move traffic further away from the historic homes in Cold Point, helping to re-establish the village character it once had.

In order to accomplish this redesign, the developer will need to receive approval from Whitmarsh Township for a zoning variance enabling the construction of 40 townhouses in an area that is currently zoned for single family residences.

The proposal is scheduled for review by the Board of Supervisors on July 24 at 8 pm.

November Referendum to Seek Voter Approval to Save Open Space

The Montgomery County Commissioners plan to renew their effort to save open space by seeking voter approval for a new \$150 million, 10-year initiative to protect parks, greenways, farmland and historic sites throughout the county.

This initiative would exceed by 50% the county's earlier 10-year open space plan, begun in 1993, which successfully preserved more than 4,400 acres of publicly accessible parks and 3,600 acres of farmland; added 316 acres to the county park system; and developed more than 22 miles of trails. Within Whitmarsh, County open space funds helped to preserve the WFIL property and supported the planting of nearly 100 trees in Miles and Valley Green parks.

A recent poll by the Montgomery County Lands Trust indicates that there is strong support for such a renewed initiative. Nearly 89% of voters were in favor of a new open space program, and 73% indicated they would actually be willing to pay for it.

There is a strong likelihood that portions of Erdenheim Farm, when they become available for purchase, would receive some of these open space funds.

County officials are developing a spending plan and intend to notify property owners before November of what they could expect to pay in taxes to support the initiative. The WTRA strongly recommends a YES vote for this initiative.

Meeting Watch

Unless otherwise noted, all meetings are held at the Township building, 616 Germantown Pike, Lafayette Hill. Meeting information is also available on the Event Calendar of the Township's website – <http://www.whitemarshwp.org> — or by calling the Township at 610-825-3535.

Shade Tree Ordinance

Recommended favorably by Planning Commission, with support of Shade Tree Commission and Environmental Advisory Board. To be reviewed by Board of Supervisors sometime in July or August.

PECO Butler Pike Mini Storage

Scheduled for third PC review on July 8 at 8 pm.

The Hill at Whitemarsh

Traffic/driveway issues to be discussed by PC at its July 22 meeting at 8 pm.

Paone Development at Butler Pike and Flourtown Road

To be reviewed by PC on July 22 and BOS on July 24. Both meetings begin at 8 pm.

Residents Tell WTRA "Stay the Course"

A recent public survey of Whitemarsh residents indicates there is strong support for the WTRA and its mission of preserving open space and controlling growth.

In April, the WTRA mailed a survey to Whitemarsh residents asking their opinion of the organization's activities to date and seeking input on its future direction. Of the people who responded, 49% were WTRA members and 51% were not. Among respondents there was a high level of awareness of the WTRA and strong approval for its performance to date. A healthy majority (65%) of respondents said they were fully knowledgeable or know something about the WTRA. Among our members, this figure rose to 96%. A total of 59% fully or partially agreed with the WTRA's positions and actions to date. Among members, this endorsement level rose to 89%, with only 1% saying they disagreed with the WTRA. The remaining 10% stated they weren't sure of our positions.

Seeking to determine if residents wanted the WTRA to broaden its mission, respondents were asked to rank in order of importance the activities the WTRA should be involved in, giving the most important activity a 10. Their response: stay the course. Topping the list were open space preservation with an average score of 8.1 and controlling growth with a 7.9. The only other activity with a 5 or more was retail district revitalization (5.0). Residents expressed less support for the WTRA's involvement in local tax issues (4.5), small-scale development issues (4.4), and Township budget and finance issues (4.2). Endorsing candidates ranked last on the list of potential activities with a 2.1. Comments indicated that residents look to the WTRA to provide balanced coverage of issues and do not want us to get in the business of advising or taking political sides.

A strong majority (89%) of our members feel the WTRA is very or somewhat effective in keeping residents informed on issues. Our email newsletter is

well read, with 93% of those who receive it saying they always or frequently read it.

Residents' comments were overwhelmingly favorable, with many expressions of thanks for the WTRA's efforts on the Hill at Whitemarsh and Quarry and its sponsorship of the 2001 Board of Supervisors candidates forums. Many expressed a desire for the WTRA to strengthen its educational role on township issues and to communicate more often and more broadly to residents.

The WTRA would like to thank all those who took the time to respond to our survey. Your feedback was enormously encouraging and helpful in determining our future direction.

We also want to thank those who offered to become actively involved. As a volunteer organization, we depend on you, our members, to be the eyes and ears of your community. The most effective barriers to inappropriate development are a strong community vision, effective ordinances, and an informed citizenry. Together, we will ensure that Whitemarsh has them all.

Preliminary Plan for Hill at Whitemarsh Reviewed by Planning Commission

After more than a year since its last presentation to the Township, the Hill at Whitemarsh returned to the Planning Commission on June 3 for review of its preliminary plan. The Hill at Whitemarsh, a continuing care retirement community, is proposed to be built on the current site of Eugenia Hospital and 54 adjacent acres of Erdenheim Farm.

While not substantively different from the sketch plan reviewed last May, the preliminary plan offered a much greater level of detail about the features of the proposed development, including the landscaping and water management designs. At the June 3 meeting and a follow-up meeting on June 24, the Planning Commission focused on these features as well as the potential impact of the development on traffic along Thomas Road. Internal pedestrian and car circulation features were also considered.

The landscape design is based on the English garden concept, with a mix of formal and informal areas, intersected by pedestrian walkways and trails. Instead of trees planted just along the property line, the Hill's design will involve stepped plantings of trees and shrubs stretching from the property line up to the housing units. The intent of this design is to create more natural and interesting views, accommodate a greater diversity of trees and plantings, and screen housing units more effectively from public view. In the buffer areas around the property, the design calls for substantially more plantings than is required by the Township.

The water management plan was also a point of discussion, with

the Commissioners wanting to be assured that the neighboring communities would not be negatively impacted by run off as a result of the facility's construction. The developer's engineer explained that the water management plan follows best management practices throughout and has been designed to handle capacities well beyond what is required by the Township. With the new system in place, run off into the surrounding neighborhoods will be "dramatically reduced" from current levels, the engineer stated and neighbors should see a noticeable improvement from the current conditions.

There was also discussion of the 12 acres of woods designated for preservation. The developer explained that the woods contain both mature growth and less desirable plantings. Some of these less important trees would be replaced over time with more appropriate native species to re-establish a healthy forest. All of this would be done in concert with the Township Shade Tree Commission.

The proposed entryway to the facility and the potential impacts on Thomas Road was another major focus of the Planning Commissioners. They were particularly interested in understanding the reasons for the differing recommendations between the Township's and developer's commissioned traffic consultants. The developer's consultant said that, based on projected traffic flows, he did not feel improvements were necessary to Thomas Road. The Township's consultant, however, recommended improvements at the entrance and at the intersection of Thomas and Flourtown Roads. The Planning Commissioners requested that the two consultants meet

to come up with creative options that would ensure public safety but also ensure minimal impact on the rural character of Thomas Road. These recommendations will be reviewed at an upcoming Planning Commission meeting whose date has been tentatively set for July 22.

Once the Planning Commission feels it has adequately reviewed all details of the plan, it will make a recommendation to the Board of Supervisors, which will then review the plan.



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