

Quarry Consultant Holds First Community Meeting

On November 5, Simone Jaffe Collins held its first of several planned community workshops to hear residents' ideas for the Quarry. Peter Simone began the meeting by saying he wanted the planning process to be highly participatory. He hoped it would also help educate residents about the regulations governing development so that, when it came time for SJC to make their recommendations to the Township, the community would understand the rationale behind them. He encouraged the community to take the opportunity of these meetings to "think outside the box" and to re-imagine what the Quarry property might be in the future.

Mr. Simone and his team then provided a brief overview of the Municipalities Planning Code (MPC), which governs what townships can and cannot do with regard to land use planning and regulating land development. The MPC permits townships to:

1. develop a Comprehensive Plan
2. enact zoning and subdivision ordinances to effectuate the plan and establish development standards,
3. create municipal maps showing key elements of the plan (e.g., existing and proposed parks and open space), and
4. carry out other actions deemed necessary to implement the Comprehensive Plan, such as undertaking public information campaigns or acquiring land.

After familiarizing the audience with the process to be followed for the evening, Mr. Simone opened the floor to hear from the community. The WTRA made a brief statement recommending that any future use of the Quarry adhere to the new zoning, which read as follows:

The WTRA's position on the historically significant Corson's Quarry is clear and consistent. In June of this year 700 signatures from residents of Whitemarsh Township, many of whom live in close proximity to what is now know as the Highway Materials, Inc. property, joined in a petition requesting that the Township have the site rezoned. On October 18, 2001, after considerable delay, the Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to approve a rezoning ordinance that will assure that any future development is in keeping with the nature and character of the surrounding neighborhood. We commend BOS for taking this necessary and long overdue action. From our perspective, the interest and will of the

residents of this township has been made clear and manifest through the actions of the residents and their elected officials. Therefore, from our perspective the options are defined by the zoning ordinance that was passed unanimously by the BOS and we need not consider other alternatives.

Other possible uses put forward by members of the audience included:

- expansion space for the school district
- golf course
- bird sanctuary/nature center
- playing fields
- community center
- uses that will keep the existing holes created by quarries,
- uses that will preserve area's critical viewsapes

Much of the community response, however, centered on statements of concern and questions rather than on recommendations. Generally and briefly, statements addressed the following:

- Whatever options are considered need to factor in the impact on public services.
- Many in the community like the roads in this part of the township the way they are. If they are widened to alleviate rush hour problems, then the rural nature of this area will be permanently destroyed.
- The consultant's use of the traffic engineering term "failing" to describe many of the intersections in the Quarry vicinity sends a wrong message. This is not necessarily the perspective of the community, for whom these intersections may be alright as they are.
- Flooding is a critical concern of the community. No option should be approved that exacerbates this problem.
- The community recognizes that it may have to assume an additional tax burden in order to support its open space goals.

The questions that were posed and SJC's responses included the following:

Q: Will PennDOT be consulted or involved in assessing impact as all but one of the 12 intersections under study are owned by the state?

A: We will delineate what improvements could be made and what roadway may help move traffic. PennDOT will be brought in later in the process once Township decides what direction it wants to take.

Q: Will the Comprehensive Plan be adopted in time to guide this planning process?

A: The Plan has been put on hold. Township will take SJC's recommendations and incorporate them into the Plan.

Q: Will SJC take into consideration what is happening in neighboring townships when considering options, such as the office buildings being built in Plymouth Meeting?

A: Yes, SJC will be looking at the area market.

Q: Will SJC involve the Planning Commission at any level?

A: At points along the process SJC will seek input from smaller groups. There is no formal schedule for meetings at this point but it's the expectation that there will be interaction with groups like the PC, based on Township Manager Larry Gregan's direction.

Q: What assurance can SJC give that there will be sufficient opportunities for community input and feedback before the options get too far developed?

A: SJC expects to present some initial options at the next community meeting in December. Ideas may be posted on the Township website and distributed to public sites such as libraries, township building, and schools. There is also some expectation that there will be press coverage of options being considered. SJC wants and expects the community to be critical; that's part of process.

Q: Will SJC lay out specific costs, benefits and processes to achieve each option?

A: SJC will provide "order of magnitude" estimates but not exact costs.

After hearing from everyone, Mr. Simone said that SJC would develop an initial set of land concepts incorporating the input they had received that evening. These will be presented to the community for feedback on Tuesday, December 4 at 7 pm and on Saturday, December 15 at 2 pm, locations to be announced. Additional public meetings are scheduled for late January and February, when the study is scheduled to be completed.

WTRA Assessment of Initial Meeting

While Mr. Simone appeared to be solicitous of the community's opinions, talking about wanting the meeting to be an opportunity for "blue sky" thinking and encouraging the audience not to be constrained by any existing conditions, his response to many of the residents' suggestions

appeared to be dismissive. In particular, suggestions that involved the preservation of the property as open space or low intensity uses such as a community center or playing fields, were met with the same response that such options cost a great deal of money.

Many residents in attendance expressed concern during and after the meeting about how the proceedings were being managed. One woman told Mr. Simone outright that he seemed clearly not open to any suggestions that would preserve open space and went on to point out that he should let the community decide if they want to make sacrifices to preserve open space and maintain the rural quality of the roads and neighborhoods and not make that decision for us.

Mr. Simone also responded rather disrespectfully to the WTRA's recommendation that the study focus on uses that fall within the parameters of the newly approved zoning by stating that, in that case, perhaps there was no need for SJC's input or further study. Following the formal proceedings, Mr. Simone mentioned to members of the WTRA that he and his staff were considering proposing an option to build a new road linking Hole #1 more directly with the major roadways coming into Plymouth Meeting as a way to mitigate traffic on the two-lane roads such as Stenton and Flourtown. Such an option is based on the premise that DePaul's plans for an office complex will go through. While this is certainly not an unreasonable thing for a consultant to consider within the scope of his assignment, the WTRA questions why this seems to be one of the first options the consultant mentions rather than one of the last.

The WTRA remains hopeful that this consultancy will not be an exercise in public relations or community appeasement but a serious and fair examination of a full range of options, reflecting a truly open process. We are also hopeful that no outside pressures or constraints have been imposed on the consulting firm, which might lead SJC to be less than fair and objective in its exploration of land use alternatives. We note, as well, that Peter DePaul was present at this meeting. However, when a member of the audience stood to ask if anyone representing the developer was there that night, Mr. DePaul gave no indication of his presence.

The WTRA will be keeping a careful watch on the upcoming proceedings and on the options brought forward by the consultant to ensure that they fairly represent the views of the community.