

Planning Commission Generally Endorses Open Space and Smart Growth Policies Proposed by WTRA

In a promising victory for the cause of open space preservation, the Whitemarsh Planning Commission (PC) announced that it supported – *on a conceptual basis* -- the recommendations proposed by the WTRA and presented to the Commission at its August 14, 2001, meeting. Set forth in a Policy Brief, the recommendations advocate sweeping changes to the Comprehensive Plan and Township zoning ordinances to bring them in line with newer conservation-oriented approaches to land use and development. These are approaches that have been endorsed by the PA Department of Conservation and Natural Resources and the Natural Lands Trust, among many others.

Among the many recommendations proposed were:

- Adopt a new open space and smart growth paradigm in the Comprehensive Plan
- Create an Environmental Advisory Committee
- Require environmental impact assessments of all developments
- Endorse a set of Development Principles setting minimum standards for development
- Create an Open Space and Smart Growth Task Force to advise the Township and oversee implementation of recommendations
- Establish an Open Space Fund to purchase critical properties
- Educate residents about private-sector options for preserving land
- Create special districts or zoning overlays to protect critically important natural resources and open space
- Change zoning ordinances to incorporate smart growth principles

PC Chair Steven Slutsky, noting the standing-room-only crowd, said he was heartened to see such a large and motivated turnout and only wished it had happened earlier in the process when the Commission was developing the draft of the Comprehensive Plan. “We’re going to take what has been given [the WTRA recommendations] and decide what we can do, what makes sense,” Slutsky said.

When pushed by members of the audience to put a timeframe to the Commission’s deliberations on the recommendations, Slutsky demurred, saying he really couldn’t make a

commitment as to when they might have a response, since so much depended on when the recommendations would get on the Commission's agenda. (The Commission meets on the 2nd and 4th Tuesday of each month.) However, Slutsky assured the audience that the Commission "wants to do the right thing" and would move as expeditiously as possible to act on the community's requests. He also assured the roomful of residents that they would be given advance notice when these recommendations were to be considered.

Commissioner Charles Hough, who was more forthcoming in his response, said he saw the evening as a "call to arms." He noted that Whitemarsh is way behind its neighbors in terms of what it is doing to protect open space and manage growth and, invoking the old axiom about the squeaky wheel, encouraged the community to keep pushing. He said he liked the suggestion of forming advisory committees, resources that he felt could be very useful in helping to shape policy, particularly if their input could be gathered early in the process. He ended by saying he believed much of what was being asked for could be accomplished and that he supported creating a task force and setting a timetable for acting on the recommendations.

Following the WTRA presentation, Slutsky asked the audience for suggestions of other things they wanted to see included in the Comprehensive Plan. Most in the audience appeared satisfied with the scope of the recommendations presented and focused their comments instead on concerns around implementation.

A representative from the Whitemarsh Valley Country Club, saying he spoke on behalf of the Club's board of directors, voiced his formal endorsement of the recommendations. Joe Meo, a Whitemarsh Valley Farms resident, expressed his support for the recommendation to create an Open Space Fund, saying he, for one, would be willing to pay extra taxes to make it happen. This suggestion was greeted with enthusiastic applause from many in the audience.

Another Farms resident, Anne Gardner, called for the formation of an advisory group, comprising the various community organizations, to help collect and feed information to the PC. Judith Stuhl suggested that the PC incorporate a "dynamic component" in the Plan that would ensure its flexibility over time and enable the Township to continue to meet changes in the future. Other residents urged the PC to hire a consultant to advise on implementation of the recommendations and the drafting of new ordinances.

The most frequently raised issue, however, was why the Commission could not provide an explicit timeframe for responding to the recommendations that had been presented -- especially given the community's increasing sense of urgency and its growing frustration with the Township's tepid response to their concerns to date. Many in the audience observed that, if the PC was serious about having the community's input, it would be more proactive in letting them know when meetings are taking place.

The PC acknowledged that it could do a better job along this line and agreed to provide advance notice of the dates and agendas of upcoming meetings.

Some of the recommendations presented by the WTRA that evening, such as creation of an Open Space Fund and creation of an Environmental Advisory Committee, are outside the purview of the Planning Commission and the Comprehensive Plan, and need to be addressed separately with the Board of Supervisors. The WTRA intends to take up these issues with the Supervisors as soon as possible and has written a letter requesting that these recommendations be put on the BOS agenda for consideration early this fall.

In adjourning the meeting, Slutsky thanked the audience members for their input and reaffirmed the Commission's interest in having the community's help. "If you don't think we're reaching out enough," he said, "just let us know."

To ensure that the Planning Commission follows through on its assurances, the WTRA will be closely monitoring its activities and reporting to members when the recommendations are scheduled for consideration.