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New zoning and building regulations approved for Garrett Hill

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By Sam Strike

In October 2007 about 60 Garrett Hill residents stormed into Radnor Township's offices demanding they be part of a proposed plan to change the zoning and subdivision regulations for their small enclave.

In October 2008 a scheduled vote on proposed changes that a steering committee of residents crafted was delayed due to concerns by members of the business community that their properties would be negatively affected.

One year later, on Monday night, Radnor's Board of Commissioners voted to approve the establishment of a Garrett Hill district with its own zoning and subdivision regulations.

There was applause – a standing ovation – and some expressed concern and disappointment.

When community members caught wind of the possibility of changes to their tight-knit community two years ago they did step into the process and established their own steering committee, which, along with consultants and township staff, crafted the documents approved Monday.

But their primary expressed goal was to change zoning and subdivision rules so that Garrett Hill would essentially stay as it exists now. In 1955 the zoning there was changed to commercial zoning and almost all properties are "non-conforming," meaning that there is not much landowners can do without permission from the township's zoning board.

There are many disagreements amongst commercial- and residential-property owners inside and outside of the new zoning-district lines. The most basic is whether Garrett Hill should change and how.

Steve Bajus, a developer and property manager who owns the Rosemont Business Campus there, says that he doesn't think it's a benefit to have a community that he says is set on having no growth.

Bajus said that the new regulations don't offer incentives for people to redevelop and improve their properties – one of many points of disagreement he has with Rick Barker, chair of the Garrett Hill steering committee.

"We have met the challenge of presenting a fair and balanced set of ordinances that will shape a vibrant, robust, positive future for Garrett Hill," Barker said Monday.

He said that the changes "strike a balance between the wishes and desires of residents and businesses," and that the steering committee appreciated all concerns from property owners and considered them carefully.

But the committee in the end did not vote to change many of the substantial contentious issues from the business community that dealt with issues like building and lot size, height and density.

Bajus also wanted the Rosemont Business Campus to be excluded from the new zoning district, which covers part of Conestoga Road and Garrett Avenue.

Six of the seven Radnor commissioners voted to approve the changes.

Kevin Higgins (Ward 2) dissented, telling the steering committee that the outcome was “exactly what the Bill of Rights was meant to stop.”

There was only one property owner affected by the zoning change on the steering committee, Higgins said.

Similarly, two and a half years ago when the Wayne Business District Overlay was created, there was only one affected property member on the board that crafted that. And that person was Bajus.

Hardly any redevelopment has taken place in downtown Wayne since the zoning change, and that could largely in part be due to the economy, but Bajus said only time will tell how the zoning and subdivision changes manifest themselves in Garrett Hill.

Radnor Township's director of community development, Matt Baumann, agreed that the zoning is long-term and strategic, but said, “I believe there's been value created in Garrett Hill as a result of this zoning.”

Baumann said he thinks the ordinances are “a good start.”

“It's been a long road, but I'm really proud of the folks over there... I'm happy for them, I really am,” he said. “But I've got my work cut out for me... to start enforcing these codes.”

Bajus said he was disappointed by the commissioners' decision, which he said was political, and stands firm in his beliefs about how it could affect Garrett Hill.

In five or 10 years, he predicted, the township will hire consultants to try to find out why Garrett Hill hasn't changed at all.

“They're unified against this ghost of a developer trying to rezone... Garrett Hill has the potential to be a nice area, but you as a shopper, is there anything to draw you here?” Bajus asked.

He doesn't think the residents want to draw anybody from the outside there – perhaps another fundamental disagreement.

To be sure, residents have expressed concern about increased traffic, cars and density and sought to limit them and to keep the neighborhood in the same scale that it has been.

Barker pointed out that the new zoning allows for valuable “mixed-use” development in the business corridor and said that mixed-use is what creates the need to regulate the density.

Barker, one of the many people who spent hundreds of hours over the past two years in the rezoning effort, said that the documents are “fair, well-balanced and carefully considered... mindful of individual interests and the best interest of community as a whole,” he told the commissioners Monday, emphasizing the last three words.

Only time will tell what will become of the neighborhood and if Garrett Hill, as the lawn signs posted there read, was “saved.”

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