

DOYLESTOWN BOROUGH PLANNING COMMISSION
FEBRUARY 27, 2024
MEETING MINUTES

The meeting of the Doylestown Borough Planning Commission was held at Borough Hall at 7:30 pm on February 27, 2024. Members present were as follows:

James Lannon, Chairman
Gus Perea
W. Andrew Happ
Heather Mahaley
MaryAnn Baenninger
Nicholas Caramenico
P.R. West
Lynn Bush

Doylestown Borough Public Works Director Phil Ehlinger and Doylestown Borough Director of Building and Zoning Karyn Hyland attended the meeting.

CALL TO ORDER: Mr. Lannon called the meeting to order at 7:34 pm, followed by the Pledge of Allegiance in honor of Martin Corr.

REORGANIZATION: The Commissioners voted unanimously for Mr. Lannon to remain the Planning Commission's chairperson and for Gus Perea to remain vice-chairperson.

MEETING MINUTES: The January 9, 2024, meeting minutes were approved as amended.

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN UPDATE: Mr. Ehlinger talked to the commission about developing a strategy to re-focus the process involved with the Comprehensive Plan. He would like to create a different dynamic for giving the consultants specific tasks, including more land use and planning details.

Ms. Bush agrees that the approach has been less planning and more of a laundry list of items and trying to assign those items to categories. Ms. Baenninger agreed with Mr. Ehlinger and Ms. Bush. She referenced the new hotel and event space application at 57 W Court St as an example. She thinks the Borough is reaching a tipping point about whether we are where people live or visit. She thinks this is at the heart of some of the more challenging conversations that need to take place. Mr. Caramenico pointed out that while the businesses and residents sometimes conflict with one another, the fact remains that one wouldn't exist without the other.

Mr. Ehlinger noted a delicate balance at play in this Borough, and we need to figure out how to get this balance right. One of the themes of the Comp Plan should be stewardship. Ms. Mahaley wants this plan to be flexible enough to anticipate and address changes in the future. Mr. Caramenico mentioned the concept of benchmarks and how using benchmarks can show us where the Borough has been and where it will continue to grow and go. Mr. Caramenico views this as a "less is more" idea. He thinks maybe the entire Comprehensive Plan should be narrowed down more. Mr. Caramenico believes that a mission statement is developed and used at the beginning of the document to help people reading the plan understand the goals.

Mr. Lannon liked using phrases like "this is home" to guide the plan. Ms. Bush also noted that it is essential to note that Doylestown is Bucks County's county seat. That alone will make this plan look different from every other comprehensive plan. Mr. Ehlinger thinks a list of the top 5 ideas is needed to help with the direction and steering of this land use plan. He doesn't know what can be done about social issues, but land use and dimensional use changes can be put in the plan. He wants to know what makes Doylestown and how those things can be made better. For example, transportation can mean complete streets, pedestrian and bicycle zones, the DART, and public transit. These things make this town great, and improving them will ultimately improve our town. Maybe there is an opportunity for additional bus structures; DART stops could have shelters, or perhaps more DART stops. Pedestrian, bicycle, and vehicular circulation are all critical to the Borough. Mr. Ehlinger said the Comp Plan is the wheel's hub; the spokes are all the issues we discuss within the Plan.

Concerning the conversation about the industrial zoning topic, Ms. West thinks the plan should describe the “why” and how that impacts the future of Doylestown. She wants entrepreneurs to consider manufacturing and building products in the Borough, hiring residents to work there, and knowing they have transportation opportunities. We can help people think about this when they look at the plan. Actively engaging people and making them think of industrial space in the Borough is essential, as well as preserving that space for industry. Ms. Mahaley wants people to understand that this is a mixed-use town. The mixed uses allow everything we love about this town to thrive. If industry or commercial zoning is changed to residential, this will eventually become a bedroom community, and people won’t be able to do all they can now. Mixed-use is a driving force for the town.

Ms. Hyland reminded the Commissioners that they had narrowed it down to three topics. They were the value of maintaining a balance of mixed-use, the focus on family, such as multigenerational housing, and transportation/circulation. She reminded them that there should be an environmental aspect. Mr. Ehlinger suggested discussing the land use implications for the environmental section of the plan. Small-scale wind and solar are in the wheelhouse of land use planning. These things should be discussed due to the zoning implications accompanying them.

Mr. Ehlinger thinks historic preservation needs to be included as well. The historic fabric of Doylestown is essential to help tell the town's story. The historic district has been expanded four times in the past 30 years. Talking about the thriving historic district over 50 years old tells a story and may suggest other opportunities to develop in the future. It is a critical issue that needs to be discussed but is not necessarily broken.

Mr. Caramenico said that thinking of this from the perspective of trying to encompass community members, there are a lot of positives that can be landed on there. Regarding land use, topics like these could encourage the development of other things, such as recreation spaces. Recreation, arts, and culture all belong in the plan. We already do all these things well. The town wouldn’t be what it is if it weren’t for the people who come from out of town for the cultural aspects of our Borough, like the car show and bike race. Ms. West wondered if there is a place in the plan where all these things can be included. These three topics are a vital part of our community. The parks and recreation have evolved over the last 15 years; how can we help this grow in the future?

The Commissioners, along with Ms. Hyland and Mr. Ehlinger, discussed the benefits of Doylestown Borough and how some of the pros and cons of living or working in the Borough could be improved. Much of the conversation also focused on whether or not the items discussed were land-use topics.

Ms. Hyland and Mr. Lannon need to meet with the County Planning Commission consultants and plan for the March 12, 2024 meeting. Ms. Hyland asked whether the commissioners would hold a comprehensive plan meeting in March. Mr. Ehlinger would like to produce a document that will be given to the consultants. It was agreed that March 12 is too close. Mr. Lannon suggested the next Comp Plan meeting should be on the second Tuesday in April and that the regular March Planning Commission meeting be used as another check-in. Mr. Ehlinger would like to see this document be a collaborative effort. Mr. Lannon would like to create a shared presentation that will be a working document that can be given to the consultants. The more straightforward it is, the better the results of the Comp Plan.

OLD/NEW BUSINESS: Under new business, Mr. Perea would like to start the Planning Commission and Comprehensive Plan meetings at 7:00 p.m. Mr. Perea made a motion, seconded by Ms. Baenninger. The motion passed unanimously.

ADJOURNMENT: With no further business, the Commission adjourned at 9:22 pm in honor of Libby White.

Respectfully submitted,
Erika Fellman