



VISTA 2025 Goal 1:

Maintain and enhance “quality of place” as a key component of economic health

Goal 1 Team Meeting

June 29, 2017

Meeting Notes

Team Members Attending: W. Boulton Alexander, Kimberly Brumbaugh, Don Hannum, Claudia Hellebush, Ernie Hollings, Roger Huggins, Michelle Kichline, Susan Marshall, Todd Pohlig, Stephanie Stevens

Also Attending: Daniel Arbucias, Marybeth DiVincenzo, James Logan, David Sciocchetti, Gary Smith

Michelle Kichline

Welcomed all team members and invited everyone to introduce themselves. Requested comments on meeting notes from previous meeting. None were received.

Introduced the Commercial Landscapes Task Force planning process commenting specifically on the effort's look at the issues facing County office parks. Noted that Chesterbrook was controversial at the outset but had become a well-accepted part of the County. Added that Great Valley had grown into a core component of the County's strong economy. Recognized the importance of keeping the County office parks strong. Introduced Brian O'Leary to review the Commercial Landscapes process and reports.

Brian O’Leary

Stated that the Commercial Landscapes Task Force had been formed to address the question of how the County can remain competitive in the face of market changes like the heavily discussed trend of movement from the suburbs back to the city. Noted that VISTA 2025 called specific attention to the factors impacting office parks (antiquated structures, site design and land use configurations). Explained that the CCPC Commercial Landscapes effort that eventually emerged expanded its focus to look at three additional areas, in addition to office parks, that had issues or challenges – transit oriented development (TOD), greyfields (malls and commercial areas experiencing distress) and brownfields (sites with environmental challenges). Noted that four separate reports had been generated, one for each of the four topic areas.

Indicated that some of the factors impacting all of these areas were technological and generational change. Added that walkability and the convenience of mixed use development had arisen as new drivers of decisions on where people lived and where businesses wanted to locate. Pointed out that the situation in places like Chester County was not as dire as the media made it out to be.

On the **Commercial Landscapes Brownfields** report, stated that there were 592 designated brownfields in Chester County. Indicated that they often had perception and market issues as well as extra costs associated with any redevelopment. Noted that the passage of Pennsylvania Act 2 had reduced liabilities for potential developers and significantly improved the ability to remediate and redevelop these environmentally challenged properties. Noted that the recommendations in the report included:

- Understand the process and hurdles
- Take advantage of incentives and tax relief
- Simplify zoning and allow for some flexibility in re-use
- Protect the community character
- Allow pop-up uses
- Make sites greener

David Sciocchetti

Asked if there was a prioritized list of brownfields to be remediated and was advised that that was not the case. Added that many of the county's urban centers seemed to have at least one site that had been a long term challenge in terms of redevelopment.

Brian O'Leary

Indicated that there was significant attention given to those sites, particularly when there was a developer to work with.

Claudia Hellebush

Asked about the owners of the brownfields sites and their responsibility for addressing any environmental issues.

Brian O'Leary

Indicated that if the environmental problems are generating external impacts, then the federal government can take action. Noted that environmental issues create significant challenges to efforts to sell and redevelop this kind of property. Reiterated that Pennsylvania Act 2 had improved this situation.

Gary Smith

Stated that there were legal mechanisms where a new owner can take possession of a brownfield site and be protected from the legal liabilities of prior owners to allow for redevelopment to take place.

Roger Huggins

Added that there is also lender indemnity to encourage lending to support redevelopment.

Gary Smith

Noted that CCEDC is seeking to be a catalytic agent in getting brownfields redeveloped.

Todd Pohlig

Commented that the goal is to find a re-use for these properties and not let them sit idle.

Brian O’Leary

On the **Commercial Landscapes TOD** report, Stated that there are 12 passenger rail stations total in the county, five of which are Amtrak stations. Noted that for the most part, development in the area of the stations is challenged by small development sites and complex ownership issues. Added that neighborhood concerns often include:

- Density
- Height
- Character
- Traffic

Noted that the recommendations in the report included:

- Importance of vision and master plan
- New zoning to allow higher density and new uses by right
- Design standards for parking location, building placement and building design
- Include sidewalks, streetscapes and greening

Described the challenges that have faced proposed developments at Devon Yards and Waterloo Gardens as examples of these types of issues.

Michelle Kichline

Commented that the Paoli Station area had a brownfield site that had been proposed as part of a TOD project. Asked for thoughts on why it had not progressed.

Brian O’Leary

Suggested that the proposals had their own issues that were complicated by Amtrak possession of the property.

Michelle Kichline

Commented that different municipalities often have different visions and philosophies about development. Described how fears about the unknowns of new development may outweigh the known issues associated with existing uses. Noted that the DVRPC was initiating work in July on the impacts of density including such items as property values, school children and traffic.

Brain O’Leary

Noted that SEPTA tended to be open to TOD type development.

Todd Pohlig

Commented that residential density supports commercial uses and that it was important to find the right mix. Noted the importance of master plans, zoning and design standards in clarifying what is acceptable. Noted the approach to the proposed development around the Downingtown station as an example.

Brian O’Leary

On the **Commercial Landscapes Greyfields** report, noted that Chester County did not appear to be overbuilt when it comes to retail – 20.8 square feet per person of shopping center space locally versus 23 feet nationally. Added that we have significant retail on our borders like the King of Prussia mall. Reported that retail is changing and is in the process of re-inventing itself, especially in the face of on-line sales. Noted that the recommendations in the report included:

- Perform market analysis – focus on experience based retail
- Bring the business community together
- Allow alternative uses

- Consider greening/buffering/signage as key physical improvements

Todd Pohlig

Suggested that these properties provided a great opportunity for stormwater management citing experience in Villanova as an example.

Roger Huggins

Noted that repurposing was already taking place, noting the proliferation of medical services into malls and traditional strip shopping centers.

Brian O'Leary

Commented that that was a logical transition in that the County is projected to add 146,000 new residents by 2045 and to double its 65 plus population.

On the **Commercial Landscapes Office Parks** report, indicated that Chester County has about 30 million square feet of office space. Noted that rents (\$25/per square foot) and vacancies (12%) at Chester County office parks were okay not great. Noted that space per employee was going down and that younger workers had new ideas about company cultures and amenities. Indicated that recommendations in the report included:

- Organize businesses and market strengths of area
- Add amenities and uses
- Consider more height, smaller setbacks and more impervious coverage
- Improve connections to transit

Used a Liberty Property Trust image of a possible development approach to illustrate how a modern office park might be configured.

James Logan

Commented that density and its impacts on demands for new school capacity continued to be a big issue.

Brian O’Leary

Responded that higher density, mixed use development typically had a modest impact on area schools due to lower numbers of school age children. Added that many residents of these types of residential developments are double-income-no-kids or empty nesters.

Claudia Hellebush

Suggested that affordable housing is a key issue in Chester County and asked where the working poor would be able to live in the County.

Marybeth DiVincenzo

Added that this category included many current employees at County companies.

Claudia Hellebush

Indicated that posted rents were often \$1,950 per month and could go as high as \$2,250, very difficult for many to pay.

Brian O’Leary

Commented that this issue did not rank high in the survey for Landscapes 3, but agreed that more work was needed to better understand the real scope of the problem.

Roger Huggins

Suggested that the demand for more apartments was part of a generational change in housing preferences.

Brian O’Leary

Suggested that this was part of a cyclical process.

Todd Pohlig

Commented that we had an aging population where not everyone wanted to own.

Bo Alexander

Commented that self-driving cars would lead to a similar decrease in desire to own automobiles.

Todd Pohlig

Noted that changing the use by right designation in Lower Merion had a real impact on developers.

Brian O’Leary

Suggested that accessory apartments may be one way to address the need for more affordable housing.

David Sciocchetti

Introduced the concept of “surban”, a mix of urban feel in a suburban setting. Described recent research that argues that this is a significant trend.

Bo Alexander

Commented that redeveloping Chester County office park would not have the same impact as changing downtowns.

Michelle Kichline

Commented that Devon Yards proposed to provide a good living experience but the density of the project generated opposition.

Brian O’Leary

Commented that there was also concern expressed that the location next to the Devon Horse Show grounds would negatively impact the horse show.

Ernie Hollings

Suggested that there was a need to re-brand affordable housing.

Brian O’Leary

Stated that it was important not to concentrate the poorer residents in any particular area. Suggested that adding a 10% set aside for affordable housing to residential developments might be one approach to consider.

Susan Marshall

Commented that affordable housing in Phoenixville was an issue.

Michelle Kichline

Suggested that there was a need to hear more from local municipalities on this issue.

Ernie Hollings

Suggested that the spring CCATO meeting might be a good forum for such a discussion.