

## Guest View

**Second Thoughts About The BPG Town Center**

By Andrew J. Semeister

Like many residents of Newtown Township, I supported the BPG Town Center — it seemed to me like a clear decision based on the numerous mailings I received on something that seemed to be

a “no brainer”. Because of the many Town Center mailings from BPG, I attended my first Supervisors meeting ever on May 30. I am embarrassed to say. I fully expected to get more detailed information than what was pro-

vided in the mailings; however, the end result was for me and many others sitting around me confusion and frustration. Confusion because there were actually two “town centers” proposed for development — the other being the Marville Village, a mere mile or so down the road from the proposed BPG Town Center. Frustration because I was just learning now about another town center. Like others at the meeting I too was concerned that the area could not sustain businesses at both locations.

I also was offended by the arrogance of the spokesperson for BPG when he issued an ultimatum to the residents to choose either the “Big Box” (labeled the By-Right Plan) or the “Town Center Plan” — PERIOD. At that point, I resolved to attend all future meetings concerning the By-Right vs. Town Center alternatives and to visit BPG’s offices on the Ellis Property to view these alternatives for myself. What I discovered was that only the Town Center model was on display in the BPG offices. I found that somewhat concerning so I visited the Newtown Township Building to view what was available from the Township for the By-Right plan and the Town Center. The Township managers told me that sketches for the By-Right and Town Center alternatives were available, as well as Chapter 172 of the Zoning Code, the Zoning Map, the Land Use Regulations, Stormwater Management Plans, the Newtown Township Delaware County Comprehensive Plan, and a Newtown Square Master Traffic Study.

During my many visits to the Township Building to read and obtain copies of some of these materials, I had the opportunity to talk with one of the Supervisors who told me to review the Township’s Comprehensive Plan since it articulated the rationale for a town center. I decided to review it because the BPG representative at the May 30 meeting stated that the Town Center was consistent with the Comprehensive Plan. However, as I read through the “Goals, Objectives and Policies” of the Comprehensive Plan, I found the Town Center to be inconsistent with 9 out of 13 goals, 15 of the 31 objectives, 16 of the 48 policies, and I urge every resident to do their own assessment. Even if your assessment is half of mine, it is still shocking. This was most disturbing since the actual Comprehensive Plan (Ch 3, Section 2D, Policy 1) itself directly states: “The Township should review all development proposals to determine their probable effects on public service systems, including schools, emergency services, utilities, recreation, and administrative services, and should consider approval of such proposals only when they are consistent with the Comprehensive Plan.” Clearly, the town center concept as presently proposed is not even close to being consistent with the Comprehensive Plan.

I decided to attend the July 9 meeting where mailings indicated that a Supervisors’ vote would take place to select a plan. However, there was no vote that night; rather, a number of major concerns about the town cen-

ter were articulated by several of the Supervisors including: traffic, density, economic viability, land controls (open space and similar considerations), crime, need for additional police/fire, aesthetics, etc. Mr. Catania expressed disappointment that none of the resident speakers really addressed these issues. (I am sending a separate letter to the Board of Supervisors to specifically address most if not all of these issues and I urge everyone to do the same.) In the meantime, I want to share with you the results and impacts in the information I found.

After the July 9 meeting and still troubled by the Town Center’s inconsistency with the Townships Comprehensive Plan, I decided to review the Traffic Study since this was a topic universally on the minds of the vast majority of the residents and Supervisors at the meetings on May 30 and July 9. What I discovered was that the intersection at Routes 252 and 3, as well as other intersections in the surrounding area, currently experience high traffic volumes that saturate acceptable levels of service now before any of the four major developments are taken into account. Although the surrounding area of this intersection is largely developed with single family detached housing and light retail commercial uses, the study focused on the potential existing and proposed corridors through them, as identified in the Comprehensive Plan, to allow traffic to circumvent the intersection and thereby relieve traffic congestion. I was horrified to find that these proposed alternatives to relieve anticipated congestion with new roadway improvements would, in many instances, as I understand the Traffic Study, require the acquisition by the Township of residents’ lawns deemed right-of-way and in some cases even more property — including businesses and possibly homes. These are the out-

standing issues. Further, the costs associated with them will lead to the significant escalation of taxes over the next 10 years from the impacts on many public service systems, physical loss of property for some, devaluation of home equity for many others, reduced safety, congestion in spite of the new “improvements” which translate to more time to get where you are going, much less “real” open space, much higher density, etc.

I for one had never heard anything about this, nor have other residents I have spoken to, and I have spoken to many neighbors and residents and many of the business merchants I have frequented over the last 30 years. All had heard of the “benefits” sides, but none had ever heard of the “costs” side to alternatives from developers or at the Board of Supervisors meeting. Clearly, these impacts are to me a much greater issue than the aesthetics of buildings, the destruction of old (but not historic) buildings, larger setbacks, walking trails, high end retail, multi family vs. single family residences and a new identity for Newtown Square. If you agree with this assessment, then you should join me in asking the Supervisors to refrain from voting to approve the Town Center or the by-right plan until further open discussion occurs regarding these impacts and the likely substantial costs of roadway improvements as clearly identified in the Traffic Study. These impacts and costs are of such a magnitude that they must be openly discussed with the residents of Newtown Township.

Moreover, it was only after reviewing a majority of these available documents that it occurred to me that it took hundreds of years to develop approximately 65 percent of Newtown Township. But, with approval of these significant developments along Route 3 and along Route 252, approximately 25 to 30 percent of the remaining 35 percent of the land available in the Township will be developed within the next 10

years! So much for concern about traffic, open space, the environment, health, safety, consistency with the existing character of Newtown Square: single family detached houses (low, medium, and large) with appropriate mixes of multifamily and retail. We need to be looking at the forest and not the trees.

Furthermore, to insure that the open discussion of these vital and critical issues to all of us occurs, I hereby withdraw my support for the Town Center until these issues have been fully addressed and resolved to everyone’s satisfaction — developers and residents alike. We clearly want a win-win for all of us, not a win-lose as the current Town Center configuration proposes, nor a lose-lose as the current “sketchy” by-right plan proposes. To insure that we get the attention of both Supervisors and developers alike, I recommend that we all currently oppose the Town Center concept until both the Board of Supervisors and BPG address and resolve these major impacts, costs, and property threats to the residents of the Township and that open discussions about these major concerns in future meetings like those in May. When we achieve a win-win solution for both the developers and residents alike, I and I feel many others, would reconsider supporting a Town Center and where it should be located — be it at the Ellis Preserve or Marville Village or not at all if inconsistent with the Comprehensive Plan and if the major negative impacts as currently proposed are not eliminated.

Given that the weeks in August are the biggest vacation times of the year for most people, many residents may not be able to attend the Supervisors meeting on Aug. 13. The vote on the Town Center should be delayed given the vacation season and the many outstanding questions that have not yet been resolved.

*Mr. Semeister is a resident of Newtown Square.*