

Centre Documenters

Meeting: State College Planning Commission, Zoning Revision Advisory Committee Borough Council joint meeting

Borough: State College

Documenters Names: Isaiah Maldonado, Talaya Coffey

Date: Jan. 18, 2024

Start Time: 7:00 p.m.

End Time: 9:20 p.m.

Attendance

- As noted in the agenda, this is a hybrid meeting with community members and council members attending in-person and via Zoom.
- There were nine people in the audience with the addition of two Documenters.
- There were several people attending via Zoom.
- The audience members fluctuated throughout the meeting. Some people entered for the public commenting portion specifically.

Notes

Roll Call.

Election of Planning Commission Chair, Vice-Chair, and Centre Regional Planning Commission Liaison:

- At the first meeting of every year, the planning commission is reorganized: Zoe Boniface was nominated and named as the chair of the commission, and Anita Genger is vice-chair.

Approval of meeting minutes: December 21, 2023. Motion and approved.

Chair Report.

- Tony Sapia was welcomed to the planning commission

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Comprehensive Zoning Revision.

With new members in attendance, the committee is reviewing what was completed in 2022 and 2023.

State College Planning Director Ed LeClear presented on the comprehensive zoning revision.

The planning commission is looking to write updated zoning code. In order to do this, they need to come to a majority agreement and then pass the drafted code to the consulting team to review.

A follow-up note as we edit our notes: State College is currently in the process of a comprehensive revision because most of the borough zoning ordinance still in use today was originally adopted about 65 years ago and it has been amended hundreds of times.

Planning staff of the borough is working with a consulting firm and input from council members, planning commission members, and the zoning revision advisory committee.

Planning commission does not write the zoning ordinance. Ultimately, they will recommend what staff/they consult with the borough council for final approval.

LeClear shared the guidelines for writing new zoning code and it is as follows:

Three-Prong Test for Code Writing:

- 1) Do we believe the language is legal and won't jeopardize the borough?
- 2) Is the language clear and concise and be operationalized and enforced. Will it get off the ground and get the desired results?
- 3) Is there a reasonable expectation that the private sector will choose to take the risks to make a change and build the project. Will it be built and put into effect?

What constitutes as a consensus:

- 1) Four council members need to vote yes to adopt the ordinance.
 - 2) If the mayor is not in approval, they need five council votes.
- LeClear said the borough lost population in the 2020 Census — from roughly 42,000 to 40,501. He said he believes the representation is inaccurate and that the population is closer to 43,000 people.
 - State College is one of the densest communities in Pennsylvania.
 - More than 13,000 housing units in State College

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- The median income in the State College housing market is \$43,015 (2017-2021 Census)

What Zoning Regulates

- Use of land
- Size, height, location of structures
- Areas on lots to be occupied/left open.
- Density and intensity of use
- Natural, historic, and agricultural uses and activities

Downtown Districts

- Three districts
 - 1) College + Allen district
 - 2) Downtown district
 - 3) Collegiate district

Consensus Zoning Priorities for Allen + College District

- Maintain “main street” scale
- Achieve sustainability and energy efficiency objectives
- Maintain first floored pedestrian-oriented uses
- Incentivize for tenancy other than undergrad or grad students
- Improve pedestrian space in front yards
- Strategically use parking requirements to target areas for redevelopment

Consensus College + Allen District Zoning Policies

- Base permitted height = two stories
- Incentives permitting up to a maximum of five stories
- Incentives include additional floor of market rate units for a floor of deed-restricted units for tenants other than undergrad or grad students
- Other incentives related to LEED certification and sustainability
- Require limited setbacks to increase pedestrian space
- First floor pedestrian-oriented commercial use is required
- Allow for conversion of upper floor office space to affordable housing
- Require a percentage of units to be one- and two-bedroom units

Proposed that current student housing isn't one bath to one bed so that in the future if anything changes these buildings can be used as housing for families. Families are more likely to be able to afford a four-bed, two-bath unit than a four-bed, four-bath unit.

One member proposed that it should be possible to supply all students housing where it no longer distorts all building in State College.

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LeClear commented that that would require a large change in density and height.

One member of the council says they don't believe that they are obligated to provide more student housing downtown.

One member of the council said dorms are not as full as past years, They questioned what the borough is trying to do: move people into workforce housing or fit more students into borough housing?

Another council member said we don't offer housing because it's our moral responsibility but because it offers opportunity. Building housing on farmland and forests isn't sustainable.

The council person added that building more properties in the borough brings in more revenue from property taxes.

The adopted plans call for 15 stories which isn't well-liked by the council and the planning director doesn't believe it would be well received and put into action off the beliefs of the council.

***A Note from your Documenters:** what follows is a series of lists that is close to a direct transcription of slides presented by Ed LeClear. Since we don't have copies of those slides to include in our notes, we've opted to use those lists to guide out notes here and also share visually presented content with you here.*

Consensus Zoning Priorities for the Collegiate District

- Acknowledge market demand for student housing immediately across from campus
- Achieve sustainability and energy efficiency objectives
- Maintain first floor commercial uses
- Improve pedestrian space in front yards
- Achieve public open space objective

Consensus Collegiate District Zoning Policies

- Base permitted height = seven stories
- Incentives permitting up to a maximum of 10 stories
- Incentivize for LEED certification and sustainability.

***Note from your Documenters:** A LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification is a global standard for sustainable and environmentally friendly buildings.*

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- Incentivize for underground parking and public space provision
- Require limited setbacks to increase pedestrian space

Note from your Documenters: A “setback” is the minimum distance between a structure and a property boundary or street.

- First floor commercial use is required.

Consensus Zoning Priorities for the Downtown District

- Achieve priorities for creating downtown residential options for long-term residents
- Achieve sustainability and energy efficiency objectives
- Maintain first floor commercial uses
- Incentivize for tenancy other than undergrad or grad students
- Improve pedestrian space in front yards
- Minimize onsite parking requirements

Consensus Downtown District Zoning Policies

- Base permitted height = five stories
- Incentives permitting up to a maximum of nine stories
- Incentives include additional floors of market rate units for floors of deed-restricted units for tenants other than undergrad and grad students
- Other incentives related to LEED certification and sustainability
- Require limited setbacks to increase pedestrian space
- First floor pedestrian-oriented commercial use is required
- Reduce parking minimums and incentivize underground parking
- Allow for conversion of upper floor office space to affordable housing
- Require a percentage of units to be one- and two-bedroom units

Consensus Overall Parking Objectives

- Reduce residential minimums overall and better calibrate to the difference in bedroom numbers (ones vs. fives); find ways to reduce vehicle storage on-site
- Reduce 30k exemption for commercial space but also significantly reduce overall minimum parking requirements for commercial uses
- Continue incentives for underground parking
- Expand opportunities for off-site and shared parking arrangements.
- Require electrical charging stations and covered bike parking
- Maintain elderly/disabled use reductions

Throughout the presentation of this information, members of the commission, committee, and

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council interjected with opposing viewpoints. Some members see the university students as an opportunity to keep building and get additional tax revenue. Other members said that building taller buildings to accommodate students and community members will make State College lose its charm.

The bulk of this meeting consisted of this dialogue between members of the commission, council, and advisory committee. Because of the extensive discourse, LeClear was not able to get to their desired progress point in the presentation.

Members agreed that a space needs to be created to have more in-depth conversations so everyone can voice their concerns. In addition to that, the presentation will continue at the commission's February meeting.

Mayor Ezra Nanes suggested it would be helpful to actually stand downtown and look at the buildings and spaces being discussed at some point.

Public Hour – Hearing of Citizens

Multiple people commented on the difficulty of finding student housing off-campus. Additionally, commenters urged council and committee members to listen to the needs of community members, as opposed to being driven by their individual opinions.

After the public hour, LeClear thanked everyone for their “contributions” and “stamina,” and acknowledged staff have a “little bit of regrouping to do.”

Dismissal

LeClear reminded everyone about the next planning commission meeting in February. A member noted the agenda showed that the meeting hadn't finished (some things have been “skipped over”), but LeClear clarified that “we're not done with the meeting” and “I'm just releasing those who are not planning commission members,” so “if you are a planning commission member, please stay because we gotta finish up that meeting.”

“I'm just trying to be nice to the rest of you,” LeClear said.

***Note from your Documenters:** It was not clear to the Documenters if the remainder of the meeting was open or closed. As LeClear released everyone who was not part of the planning commission, Documenters exited with other community members. Members of the planning commission meeting stayed, and it is our understanding that they completed the remainder of the agenda items and the meeting.*

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A follow-up note as we edit our notes: We now understand that the rest of the meeting was public. CNET continued to broadcast this meeting. Based on CNET, the Planning commission had missed a vote that they needed to take, which is why the advisory committee and borough members were allowed to leave.

Summary Takeaways from your Documenters

- The commission would like to incentivize non-students to live in the downtown area.
- The commission will need to research how more tall buildings downtown may negatively impact the community.
- The commission will need to hold more room for discussion before they will come to a consensus.

Anything your Documenters were unclear about in the meeting?

It was difficult to understand how the commission is going to alter their format to allow themselves to get through all of the information they need to review.

Top Quote:

"I feel a good, strong community has a palace for everybody, and diversity is important. And I don't see that we have an obligation to provide all the housing for the university. I don't. We should be able to find a place for everybody." — *Susan Venegoni, Zoning Revision Advisory Committee, member*

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