

Exeter Township Joint Workshop

On Thursday, January 16th, a joint workshop was held at the Reiffton School Cafetorium. The workshop was the first in what could be several such gatherings where the Exeter Township Supervisors, School Board and Planning Commission are pulling together to arrive at a viable site on which to place a new school or to utilize space already within the control of the district. The meeting started at 7:40 after Supervisors' Chairwoman Dona Starr suggested that the workshop, originally scheduled to start at 7:30, not start until the many people who were still in the hallway could be seated.

Ms. Starr started the workshop by stating the purpose of the workshop to allow the two boards and the planners to come together to share information and to work to find a suitable location for another school.

Mr. Linton, the School Board Chairman, spoke about the need for more space to accommodate the growing number of students in Exeter Township and he discussed the ground rules for the workshop. He informed those in attendance that the meeting was for the purpose of allowing the two boards and the planning commission to converse and that the public would have a chance to comment at the end of the session. He also told the residents that they were not allowed to make any outbursts or take any other actions such as applauding during the workshop because it would hinder the process.

At the direction of the supervisors, Cheryl Franckowiak, the Zoning Officer, and Eric Gardecki, the G.I.S. Administrator, put together a presentation using a mapping system to show the township, properties, topography, population, and infrastructure in order to be able to see where various alternative sites exist. Dozens of sites in Exeter of 10+, 20+, and 30+ acres were shown that could be used as a site for one or more new schools.

Planning Commission member Jack Bittig discussed the use of the mapping system and stated that it could help us focus on where to best locate a new school.

Mr. Gardecki and Mr. Bittig started to discuss each of the sites until Mr. Quinter of the school board interrupted them. Mr. Quinter brought up one of the handouts, which he termed, the National Model School Siting Policy. He explained that there were numerous items of concern that were detailed in the policy with several of the properties. His assertion that this was a national policy, even though only a few states recognized it, was at the heart of discussion. Some of these "requirements" are to have a school positioned away from dumps, high voltage lines, highways, floodplains, etc.

Editor Note: Upon investigation of this "policy", it was noted that agricultural land where pesticides and herbicides have been sprayed is also listed as not desired. Therefore, the original wish of the school board to take a 110-acre farm would be against the dictates of the supposed national policy.

Mr. Quinter also made statements that the land for an elementary school should be 10 acres plus another acre for every 100 students up to 500 students. He stated that this was a requirement by the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

Editor Note: According to Site Acquisition policy (Plan Con Part C), the number mentioned by Mr. Quinter is the maximum amount of acreage for which the district can be reimbursed, not the minimum amount of acreage required for an elementary school.

Ms. Starr inquired about the projected enrollment and stated that she and Mr. Linton had started a discussion about enrollment earlier. Mr. Hart, a school board member, angrily began to answer when Mr. Linton took control and asked everyone to calm down.

Ms. Ciotti proposed construction of a school on the Reiffon School campus utilizing an area across the street for parking. The property was discussed including having it highlighted on the screen for all to see. It was mentioned that there are wetlands and some less than ideal topography as well as a geothermal issue and the sports fields

that are used by more than just Reiffon. Ms. Ciotti explained where a new building could be built and how fields could be conserved and suggested that there are already sufficient athletic fields in the township that can be used if necessary. A groan from some of the audience was followed by Ms. Ciotti explaining that we have to look at the important aspect of education and that sports for a few should not impact the education of the many.

Ms. Starr took the opportunity to ask that the plans include consideration of the initiative to make the streets safer and more pedestrian and bicyclist friendly. She mentioned the Walk Bike Berks initiative in the township spearheaded by Michele Barrett. Mr. Quinter broke in with a comment that he doubted such a program would be helpful for the next 10 years.

Editor Note: Michele Barrett informed several of the workshop participants that a new federally funded grant program would be available for the project in the spring and that approximately \$6M was allotted for Pennsylvania and would be able to help with crosswalks, sidewalks, bike paths, education for the program, etc. to help make the community and school district safer. PennDOT and many other State and Federal agencies back this initiative.

Mr. Linton turned the group's attention to the school board's preliminary site evaluations document. The school board contends that, of the 14 sites evaluated; only the Ritters Road property was found to be adequate. However, upon questioning by the supervisors it was apparent that the school board had only evaluated sites based on the potential for having 3 schools constructed on the property. The school board also did not seek assistance from the township by inquiring about being granted waivers on height restrictions in zones that already allow schools. Ms. Starr stated that the supervisors would gladly work with the school board to help with the plan in one of the areas where schools are permitted. Supervisor Kevin Kennedy stated that there are 10 of the 13 zones that allow schools and that this number was increased from 6 several years ago to help the school district. There were other questions concerning the evaluation process and Mr. Kennedy did not believe that the school board had proved that there were no alternatives to taking

farmland. Mr. Kennedy said that it really is a case of "needs" and "wants".

The school board was asked why they ruled out the Lausch property, to which a school board member replied that they wanted to save that for a new high school annex.

Editor Note: At a recent school board meeting, the school district's architect unveiled several designs for one or two new elementary school buildings on the Lausch property if they had to build there.

Ms. Starr asked to speak about recent discussions concerning the Reading Country Club. She stated that the school board had come to the supervisors a few years ago. They were concerned about the rumor of a developer wanting to build up to 725 homes on the RCC. The school board stated that the addition of that many homes would be detrimental to the community and would require more schools to be built. The supervisors asked the School Board if they were going to attempt to take the land by eminent domain to which the School Board replied that they didn't have the funds to do so. They asked the supervisors to take action and that's why the supervisors obtained the RCC. A member of the school board stated that the expense incurred by the township shows that the school board could not have taken the land. However, the supervisors pointed out that the price was so high because the land was taken for recreation purposes and that it would have been lower if taken for education.

Mr. Kennedy asked Mr. Gardecki to put up the screen that showed 26 parcels of 20 acres or more that he thought would be good for school construction. A couple of these parcels were discussed and determined to have some less than desirable characteristics such as proximity to the dump, flood plains, power lines, etc. However, one 76-acre plot and one that was over 30 showed potential. Mr. Kennedy was asked to give the school board the list of the 26 sites for their engineer to review.

Mr. Kennedy made the statement that the state and the county laws were set up to preserve agricultural land and referenced the

governor's Executive Order 2003-2, Agricultural Land Preservation Policy.

Mr. Deisinger, a school board member, expressed his frustration that there was an apparent double standard, allowing Central Catholic to build a school on AP land and not the township's school district. Mr. Linton agreed with this statement. At this point, Ms. Starr and Ms. Kircher noted that there was only one member of the current board of supervisors who voted for allowing schools in the AP and that the other four were actually opposed to having the CCHS on the farm on Ritters Road. The planning commission's, Mr. Littlehales, state that the planners had all opposed that change to the zoning and the approval of the conditional for CCHS.

At 9:10 PM, public comment commenced following the agreement by the three groups to schedule another workshop soon.

Approximately, ten residents spoke and half of them felt that the workshop had been a waste of time because there was too much discussion about the past. The residents also stated that they thought there would be more than just talk and that a real decision needs to be made soon.

One of the residents who spoke was stopped after two minutes and did not get across his suggestion. The resident had contracted with an architect to develop a plan for two schools on a small (<17-acre) footprint and he had tried numerous times to have the school board look at the plan. The plan was initially developed to have the schools built on the CCHS Stadium property that was suggested by many residents as a good site. However, the plan is universal and would be able to be used on just about any site of 12 acres or more (and still have sports fields). This idea is backed by many residents.