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Natural Selections: Let's have a Bridge to Somewhere for all

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By Mike Weilbacher

One of Lower Merion's more contentious planning decisions was rendered this week regarding the O'Neill Development Company's Righters Ferry Project, some 580 apartments on five tall buildings on the site of the old Connelly Containers, where Lower Merion now parks a passel of school buses. As noted in the news section by reporter Cheryl Allison, the project was given a conditional-use approval — with a lot of conditions.

Contentious, because the conditional-use hearing unfolded over many months of testimony that consumed many hours of time. No surprise there: this is very high-stakes poker. But bottom line: that approval was a good thing.

What the project does right is bring a lot of people down to the river again, which, to this writer, makes sense. The word "Schuylkill" translates from the Dutch as "hidden river," as early European explorers couldn't find the marshy mouth where the Schuylkill hits the Delaware (the Lenape, of course, knew where it was all along). For too long the Schuylkill has been hidden from us, by trains, by industry like the Pencoyd Iron Works, by the expressway: it's time to reclaim our river, the region's greatest natural resource.

This project will bring hundreds of people to the Schuylkill's edge. Great. What the project also does right is allow the Schuylkill River Trail to ramble across its front door, people like you and me coming to hike its length, connecting from there to the Cynwyd Heritage Trail and Flat Rock Park in Gladwyne. O'Neill is donating acreage on the western side of the property to the township too: bravo.

What it also allows, and what may become its greatest asset, is the project's residents can amble into Manayunk in the evening to take in a movie, eat at a tony restaurant, shop at Banana Republic. Imagine that: strolling to a multiplex. I'm in.

But this asset is hugely important to O'Neill in another critical way: because the project's residents can walk to Manayunk's bus lines, the project qualifies for a higher density bonus. By right they couldn't get 580 units on this site; with the bus stop across the river, they can. Better, the project proposes less parking than usual because of this access to mass transit on the Philly side.

So the project allows more units (thus more income) and less parking (thus less cost) because of a bus stop. Which raises an intriguing question: will Righters Ferry residents really walk across the bridge to stand at a bus stop? If not, they will be driving a car up Righters Ferry Road.

Thus the bridge finds itself a nexus of acrimony between the developer and the township's planning staff and elected officials. The township saw this Righters Ferry land as an opportunity to complete an important piece of trail connections, bringing the eastern end of a proposed Lower Merion river trail, which currently starts at the newly

reconfigured and greatly enhanced Flat Rock Park east, here. Hikers and bikers can cross the river into Manayunk and there connect to the river trail on that side that goes west to Valley Forge and north up the Perkiomen. They might one day, when all is connected, even head east into Center City.

Unlike that infamous bridge in Alaska that was much discussed in the fall of 2008, this is a bridge to somewhere. Many somewheres in fact.

But O'Neill proposed to restrict the bridge's access to residents of the project, not allowing the rest of us to walk the bridge, likely concerned about liability and security, not wanting Philadelphians on the Manayunk side and nonresidents on this side, to flock to the property. An earlier design for the project has the site's cars using the bridge for entering and leaving the property — out in the morning, in in the evening — but that plan has been scrapped for emergency vehicles and pedestrians only.

Remember that this project is built in an area zoned M for Manufacturing, and a special ordinance, written with O'Neill's hands-on involvement, was approved to allow for the conditional use of property like this for dense residential. It has been no secret all along that the township was only entertaining this ordinance to score a completed Schuylkill River trail. So it comes as no surprise that one of the conditions imposed by the township is opening the bridge for public use.

As advocates for the evolving trail system we urge O'Neill to accept this condition.

O'Neill argues that the bridge is technically in Philadelphia so Lower Merion cannot legislate how it uses that bridge. Well, by the same token, argues Lower Merion in return, you can't use the bridge's access to mass transit to score density and parking bonus points, then take the bridge off the table for other considerations.

The site's plan has been highly fluid and will likely change in the months ahead, and has other serious design and development issues to wrestle with, like the location of parking (the township decision told O'Neill to pull hundreds of parking spaces out of the floodplain), the amount of impervious cover, the river's unpredictability, traffic into and out of the site on little Righters Ferry Road, building height, the public plazas required along the trail by the ordinance (designs we saw last year were underwhelming and, while they may have met the technical requirements, were unimaginative and unusable by walkers).

I hope these issues can get ironed out, because it would be a great place to live. And hike.

We'll see where this goes from here. One route is for O'Neill to accept the conditional-use hearing's favorable judgment and bring in a plan that meets those conditions. The other route is to appeal the conditions to Common Pleas Court. The township has been girding for an appeal all along, but let's hope that, when the dust settles and the project is built, we have a completed trail to Manayunk we can all use.

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