

Chapter 5: Summary of Stakeholder Meetings

Introduction

At the beginning of the Plan process, the Township identified key individuals and organizations which have an interest or direct involvement in the riverfront section of the Township. The consultant, often in conjunction with Doug Knauss, Director of Parks and Recreation, met with most of the stakeholders. In a couple of instances, telephone interviews were held. In all cases, useful information and opinions were shared. In some cases, this information led to additional investigation of concerns not originally known of, and all of the stakeholder meetings have had an impact on the final recommendations of this Plan.

The following pages summarize the various stakeholder discussions:

Conshohocken Borough

Met with: Christine Stetler (Community Development Coordinator and Zoning Officer) and Elizabeth Lankenau (Borough Planning Consultant)

Major Points Discussed:

- Borough Council interested in passive recreation along the river.
- From Ash Street to Cherry Street, O'Neill provided a 100-foot strip as part of his development approval; this area is deeded to the Borough for any type of recreation the Borough wants, though O'Neill is legally bound to maintain the area
- A trail exists from 8 Tower Bridge to a point past Ash Street and behind "Riverwalk"
- The Borough is interested in recorded access easements on all properties
- There have been some discussions between the Borough Engineer and SEPTA about crossings over the tracks requiring minimal investment
- The Borough is interested in linking up with any trail developed in Whitemarsh.
- The Borough is interested in a good signage package to highlight the river trail and attractions.
- A study has been done looking at connections to the river.
- Ms. Stetler recommended we consider a connection to Washington Street through the Finnaren and Haley property.
- Ms. Stetler requested that the Borough Planning Commission be invited to a WTPC meeting when we have some recommendations.

Springfield Township

Telephone Interview with: Mike Taylor (Assistant Township Manager)

Major Points Discussed:

- The adopted Open Space Plan shows a trail on Manor Road which would link Forbidden Drive/Northwestern Avenue (across Ridge Pike and down Manor Road) to the river; This is a physically challenging trail and needs to be worked out.
- There is a Whitemarsh resident and some Springfield neighbors who are opposed to this trail.
- This is not an area where money is likely to be spent; it will be spent on population centers first. Trails included in the Open Space Plan are not prioritized.

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Whitemarsh Boat Club (a.k.a. Hines Rowing Center)

Met with: Lois Trench-Hines, George Hines, Larry Genuardi

Major Points Discussed:

- The Rowing Center is a 501.C.3 organization.
- Site is 3.3 acres with frontage on Washington Street and the river.
- Three colleges (Bryn Mawr College, Philadelphia University, and Villanova University women) and four secondary schools (Mount Saint Joseph Academy, LaSalle College High School, Germantown Academy, Radnor High School) row out of this club.
- When it was purchased by Hi-Trend, LLC (Lois Trench-Hines, sole member) in 2005, a Phase I environmental site assessment and a limited Phase II investigation were performed; no significant environmental issues discovered.
- Several industrial buildings are located on the site with the largest one used to store boats and for Club's operations.
- A building on the east side of the building used by the Club, is expected to be demolished; the future use of a building closest to Washington Street is undetermined but could be leased by the Club to provide some revenue.
- The Club would not want a trail along the river through their site (between the Club building and the river); it would be disruptive to their operations because boats are carried between the boat house and the river and it would create particular problems when regatta's are being held. It would represent a security threat (each boat housed there is worth more than \$40,000).
- Any trail should be directed around the Club's site (along Washington Street).
- A future plan is to possibly create boathouse condominiums on the site; concept plans have been developed showing potential improvements to implement such a plan.

Fairmount Park Commission

Met with: Mark Focht, FASLA (Executive Director) and Stephanie Craighead (Director, Planning, Preservation, Development and Facilities)

Major Points Discussed:

- Commission owns Manatawna Farm, approximately 78 acres, thought to be completely within the City limits but through discussion, discovered to be partially in WT; adjacent to East 33. Site supports Saul High School of Agricultural Sciences. Approximately 30 acres are farmed; a large community garden is also located on this tract.
- Habitat restoration is being considered for this tract, possibly in conjunction with East 33.
- One trail connection to the Lower Merion side of the river, is available via the R-6 bridge to the Ivy Ridge Trail (though this is approximately 2.7 miles from the WT/Philadelphia boundary).
- Some projects near WT which are of some interest: Canal Restoration, Venice Island Development (a stormwater system and Cultural Arts venue), and possible re-use of the abandoned Roxborough Reservoir (discussed in the "Roxborough Greenspace Plan").

Montgomery County

Met with: Beth Pilling (Montgomery County Planning Commission)

Major Points Discussed:

- The County needs a "push" to make improvements to Spring Mill Park; the Park needs an identity.

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- There is an old master plan for the Park; needs to be updated but funding has made master planning for all of the parks difficult.
- Sees access to the river in this area for a possible fishing pier, canoe launch, etc. as desirable, but safely crossing the railroad tracks is an issue. Physical access and parking on both sides of tracks is available; this crossing could possibly be “institutionalized” with additional safety features.
- County and SEPTA have an agreement for a certain number of parking spaces to be available for the Schuylkill Trail, though the County may have to reinforce this agreement with SEPTA.
- Additional trailhead parking was mentioned as a possibility on PECO right-of-way across the street from the Park, which would reinforce the Park as a destination.
- Adjacent uses to the park are also an issue (junkyard, etc.).
- If the Township develops a vision for the Park area, the County would like to cooperate to make it happen.
- No changes are planned for the Schuylkill Trail in this area.
- The Finnaren and Haley site was discussed due to its direct river access and expansive shoreline as was the desirability of making some specific recommendations for amenities to be developed on this site,
- The need for a food concession along the river (to offer healthy options) was mentioned; bait and similar fishing and boating supplies could also be offered.
- The County would like to take its lead from the Township for plans to improve its facilities in the Spring Mill area.

PECO

Met with: Suzanne Ryan (Montgomery County’s External Affairs Manager), Nate Sanborn and Greg Moton, Real Estate & Facilities)

Major Points Discussed:

- Plans were discussed to develop a trail within PECO right-of-way using County Open Space funds, from Hector Street to Butler Pike.
- PECO mentioned its Native Reclamation Project at Harts Lane and Manor Road; also, the native meadow from Wells Street halfway down to Hector Street.
- The possibility of a trail through the meadow, was discussed; since this would be a new type of facility, PECO would have to determine what would work best. If one was installed, possibly the Township could install informational/interpretive signs along the trail.
- For vehicular access, the Township could possibly use the same area as PECO already does, off of Wells Street.
- Two types of trails were discussed; grass trails on one side of the right-of-way and a paved trail. A paved trail would have to handle a 38,000-lb./axle vehicle.
- Conflicts with existing tenants in the PECO right-of-way need to be avoided. Access and trespassing are concerns. The riding rings at Ashford Farm were cited as examples.
- Any post and rail or other fencing installed along a trail in a PECO right-of-way to avoid trespassing, would be the Township’s responsibility.
- In evaluating requests to install trails or other facilities within its rights-of-way, PECO looks at future utility needs (new substations, etc.).
- For any Township trails in a PECO right-of-way, the Township would sign a licensing agreement; this agreement provides an indemnification for PECO.

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- Along Butler Pike, PECO is in favor of the right commercial development within its right-of-way; the specific use is not a major concern.
- All trees should be kept out of the rights-of-way due to the conflicts with the utilities. Shrubs and grasses can be planted along trails within a PECO right-of-way.

Schuylkill River National & State Heritage Area

Telephone Interview with: Kurt Zwinkl (Executive Director)

Major Points Discussed:

- The Heritage Area is interested in conservation efforts and other practices which foster revitalization and economic development along the river corridor.
- They are interested in the Schuylkill Trail and spur trails which extend (or could extend) to population centers. (The Schuylkill River Trail will ultimately extend from Philadelphia to Pottsville, Berks County.)
- They also are interested in boat landings for their designated “water trail” (for non-motorized boats). They are looking for landings where parking and possibly restrooms, are available.
- The Heritage Area is about to undertake a water trail master plan which will include locations for such landing areas.
- They have developed a uniform sign system; the Township could use it to sign Township trails. (Mr. Zwinkl provided an electronic copy of these subsequent to the telephone interview.)
- Also provided subsequent to the telephone interview: a summary of the Schuylkill River Valley National Heritage Area Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement (2003); the 2008 Annual Report; a map of the River Trail; an electronic copy of various documents describing the Pottstown Boat Launch (including the permit application, costs, photographs, and description of the GEOWEB Boat Ramp system utilized), a set of Schuylkill River Recreation Maps, and a brochure describing the Heritage Area.

SEPTA

Met with: Alex Flemming (Senior Long Range Planner, Budget Department)

Major Points Discussed:

- Mr. Flemming was enthused about the RDD; SEPTA is looking for more walk-up ridership at the Spring Mill Station. Parking is at capacity.
- Mr. Flemming finds the possibility of a boat access at Miquon, requiring crossing the SEPTA tracks at the existing crossing, to be acceptable. Parking would probably need to occur at the adjacent office complex (with appropriate permission).
- SEPTA does not plan to create any additional pedestrian crossings of the R6 tracks within the Township.
- SEPTA embraces pedestrian access to its stations; accessing the Spring Mill station via pedestrian trails is viewed positively.
- Spring Mill station is ADA-accessible; no additional improvements are projected for this station.

Campbell Thomas & Co., Architects

Met with: Bob Thomas, Recreation and Trail Consultant for Whitemarsh Twp. and Lower Merion Township

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Major Points Discussed:

- Connectivity to Conshohocken Borough is important, and to commercial services.
- Trail-oriented businesses are needed to avoid the need to go far off the (Schuylkill River) trail for services.
- Mr. Thomas sees Spring Mill as a “junction”; the river trail will intersect the proposed PECO and other trails, here.
- Mr. Thomas pointed out that Lower Merion Township has a pedestrian and bikeway plan (about 5 years old); a Schuylkill River West Trail is included in that plan, which would extend from Falls Bridge on the east to Port Kennedy on the west (in Upper Merion Township).
- A proposed river crossing would go from Flat Rock Park in Lower Merion to Fairmont Park (at the foot of Shawmont Street).
- Some type of river access between Riverbend Environmental Center in Lower Merion and the Schuylkill Environmental Education Center in Philadelphia, has been discussed (possibly a dock on either side of the river at these locations to allow water access from one to the other).
- Mr. Thomas mentioned a proposed SEPTA schedule change to 30-minute off-peak headways to the Norristown Transportation Center (allowed by the addition of a third track).
- The proposed River Road Bike Trail in Whitemarsh would allow a loop with the Schuylkill River Trail; it also would allow an alternative for the river trail which gets crowded; In addition, the County doesn’t clear the river trail in winter; River Road would be plowed, allowing use at all times.
- Comfort facilities were discussed; Mr. Thomas thinks these are best in parks. Joint use makes the most sense; he cited the example in Upper Providence Township where Montgomery County and the Township have developed a facility on Township land there. He thought perhaps an agreement with SEPTA and Whitemarsh Township could be worked out for a facility at the Miquon train station; Schuylkill Environmental Education Center could be a possible partner.
- Signage is needed along the river trail indicating the location of stores and other facilities which are near-by but off the trail.
- Mr. Thomas noted that due to topography, there are steps in the Schuylkill River trail crossings at Manor Road and Harts Lane.

Township Public Safety Officials

Met with: Representatives of the Township Police Department and with Township Fire Officials. Representing the Police Department, Sergeant Francis X. Wheatley and Lieutenant Michael Beaty. (Sgt. Wheatley works with public relations and grants for the Department.) Also met with Fire Marshal Calvin Bonenberger and Deputy Fire Marshal Scott Lynch.

Major Points Discussed:

- The Police representatives discussed patrolling constraints along the river as well as access issues. Some of the areas along the riverfront are isolated and allow for criminal activity, without good access for patrols.
- A road improvement that was discussed by the Police as being very desirable, was the extension of Washington Street to the south (east) to loop back and hook back into Hector Street and Spring Mill Avenue (via Lee Street). (Township Fire Officials concur with this as a very desirable improvement.) Currently, Washington Street dead ends at the northern (western) edge of the

Finneran and Haley property. Creating this extension would allow police and others to loop through the area, facilitating increased patrol and would avoid back-tracking to Cherry Street (within Conshohocken Borough) to return to Hector Street from any of a number of properties fronting Washington Street and the river.

- In terms of the proposed riverfront trail and the existing Schuylkill River Trail, lighting and an emergency phone (and possibly camera) system was discussed as being desirable. Also desirable, would be pedestrian-level lighting.
- Finally, police access to the river, should they need to work by boat, is generally done at the existing Miquon boat ramp.
- River access is very important to the Fire Officials for fire fighting along and near the river. The fire companies need to be able to draft water which requires access to the riverfront and adequate room to maneuver equipment. (Drafting water refers to suctioning water, generally through a ‘dry tube’ by creating a vacuum.) Access to the river currently occurs at Spring Mill (behind the parking deck at David’s Bridal), Finneran and Haley, and at the Whitemarsh Boat Club property. Access can also be obtained at Miquon, where a pipe has been installed under the railroad tracks, though the steep grade there makes improvements desirable. The boat access in Miquon is owned by the Philadelphia Swim Club. The Club has given the fire companies permission to launch Zodiac boats there when necessary. Fire officials also have permission to access the river at a secured, gated location just inside the Philadelphia city limits by a boat club which owns that property. In addition, Spring Mill Fire Company launches water rescues at the Villanova University boat ramp north of the Whitemarsh Boat Club and at the Boat Club property. Finally, boats can access the river and drafting is done at the facilities owned by the “Riverfront at Millenium” apartments (located primarily in Conshohocken, with some of the development extending into Whitemarsh). Improved river access and drafting facilities are key for effective fire fighting in the river area.