

David Bertram
Conshohocken Planning Commission, Chair
Final Comments for Wawa Application
January 22, 2013

On behalf of the commission and staff, I want to thank the applicant for the considerable amount of work and detail they provided for our consideration.

I would like to speak for a few minutes about my personal conclusion regarding this application- and will invite my fellow commissioners to do the same afterwards.

In determining my conclusion regarding the applicant's proposal, I looked at three items in particular:

1. The zoning intent for the RO district, per the Borough's Zoning Ordinance
2. The Land Use Recommendations for this district found in our Comprehensive Plan
3. The Objectives and Strategies for Economic Development found in our Comprehensive Plan as well

I also gave the issue of re-writing ordinances considerable thought.

I would like to say a few words about each.

Regarding the zoning intent of the RO District, it is to encourage the retention and preservation of existing residences by permitting residential uses and conditionally allowing limited office conversions. And it goes on to say that furthermore, *the intent* is to maintain the existing residential streetscape of upper Fayette, *by not allowing building additions and parking lots to be constructed in the front yard.*

The not-allowing of front-yard parking lots is very relevant and important I believe- as it clearly paints a picture of how we have wanted Fayette's upper street-scape to look.

The Comprehensive Plan states that the district, *"serves as a continuation of the existing commercial district. The Borough should maintain the upper portion of Fayette Street as a low-intensity, mixed use (i.e. residential/office) area because this provides a sensible transition between residential and commercial areas."*

The proposed project unquestionably disregards the intent of the ordinance and the recommendations of the comprehensive plan- it completely re-writes the 1) accepted Permitted uses, 2) dimensional standards, 3) special regulations, 4) signage regulations, and 5) parking regulations.

I find that in terms being aligned with our intent for this part of our borough as we have defined it our ordinances and comprehensive plan, the proposed project simply is not a match for this site in any way, shape, or form.

Regarding the economic development section of our comprehensive plan, the first two objectives, and most relevant in my opinion, are:

1. To plan strategically for the redevelopment of under-utilized and industrial properties
2. To foster a diverse mix of businesses

Addressing the second objective first, with three gas stations, numerous delis, a CVS, and a 7/11 within our roughly 1 square mile, Wawa is only offering us a complete redundancy of services and goods. Marketing studies *may* show that a convenience-store could be supported, but it is not a step toward a diverse, well-balanced, and interesting retail economy. Conshohocken is touted a very convenient place to live. In terms of retail, I believe we should aspire to more than a convenient place to stop, fill up the gas tank, grab a sandwich, and leave. We have gas stations. We have delis that are second-to-none. We need diversification.

Regarding the first economic objective- that of *Planning strategically for the redevelopment of under-utilized and industrial properties*, I have been asking myself- If there is really a need for bringing a super-sized gas station/convenience store within the border of our borough- with all of the strategic planning that this borough has already undertaken- why has this idea not surfaced before?

It is the borough's responsibility to define itself- a responsibility that belongs to council, our commissions and committees, and our residents. Dozens of people have spent countless hours and tens-of-thousands of dollars planning what our future could be in this borough. The evidence of their work and care are the Comprehensive Plan, the Revitalization Plan, and Fayette Street's Master Plan- and a high-intensity gas station is not simply a great idea that they all overlooked.

I've heard reference to a silent-majority that supports this project- but in my years of serving on this planning commission and on our revitalization committee - the silent majority did not bring the idea of needing a super-sized gas station to the table- at least not prior to this application. It is not an approved use for this site because it does not support the vision that we molded in public meetings and was then adopted by our council in our Comprehensive Plan.

Further into the Economic section of our Comprehensive Plan- *not surprisingly*- it does discuss revising zoning and development ordinances and exploring the expansion of the downtown area. It states, "*An update would show developers what development Conshohocken wants and demonstrate the Borough's willingness to work with developers to create that vision.*"

I believe the critical part of this statement is *what development Conshohocken wants*- that is, if there is room for improvement in our ordinances and change is due, the borough's leaders and residents should work together in a *proactive* way to define what we want and where we want it.

It is my view, that this application for a new Wawa has resulted in the borough taking a very re-active stance rather than proactive one- and in addition it has really divided both our leadership and residents- and I do not believe that these are circumstances under which we should rewrite our laws.

As a planning commissioner, my stance on re-writing ordinances is relatively simple. If you are NOT happy with the quality of development in your borough, you should rewrite your ordinances *after* giving all conceivable possibilities *and their impacts* their due consideration. If you are happy, you must uphold the ordinances that you have in place. And to the best of my knowledge, the borough as a whole has NOT been unhappy with general form and street-scape of the upper end of Fayette.

Re-writing our ordinance at this particular time would undermine our adopted vision of the Comprehensive Plan and in my opinion would be a demonstration of an unclear vision and wavering leadership of the borough's part.

And finally, with this particular site being very large, being on Fayette, and serving as a gate-way to our community- it is an especially rare and meaningful re-development opportunity- and if we are consider allowing a non-permitted use on this site, we would be mistaken not to take our time and consider the many other possibilities – some of which I suspect may prove to be much more appropriate and inspiring than a gas station.

For these reasons, I have concluded that a Wawa at this location is not a wise decision for the borough and my vote will be to recommend that council NOT approve this amendment.