

**TOWNSHIP OF LOWER MERION**

*Building & Planning Committee*

**Issue Briefing**

**Topic:** Ardmore Master Plan

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**Date:** April 7, 2023

**I. Action To Be Considered By The Board:**

Review and discuss the Ardmore Master Plan.

**II. Why This Issue Requires Board Consideration:**

The Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code (MPC) sets forth requirements for elected officials with respect to master planning in Pennsylvania. The MPC enables municipalities to incorporate master plans, consistent with the adopted comprehensive plan, to guide land use decisions and promote sustainable development.

**III. Current Policy Or Practice (If Applicable):**

Following the Township-wide rezoning process in 2020, the Board of Commissioners directed staff to complete a master plan for Ardmore. While several goals established in the early 2000s to revitalize Ardmore's commercial corridor have been largely realized, the community's vision and goals for Ardmore have evolved. Therefore, it is important to establish a master plan that reflects these changes and guides future growth and development in a thoughtful and intentional way.

**IV. Other Relevant Background Information:**

The draft plan aims to identify both the challenges and opportunities for the future of Ardmore. The recommendations and strategies outlined in the plan are based on an economic framework that prioritizes a thriving downtown, innovative commercial experiences, improved connections to the surrounding residential neighborhoods, and targeted reinvestment where necessary.

Staff has provided an attachment that includes detailed background information on the master planning efforts, including the public engagement process and the Steering Committee contributions.

The plan is divided into sections which include:

1. Overview & Background:
  - ❖ What is the purpose of the Ardmore Master Plan and how will it be used?
2. Public Outreach
  - ❖ How was public and stakeholder feedback used to inform the Ardmore Master Plan?
3. Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT) Analysis
  - ❖ What are the key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) that should be addressed in the Ardmore Master Plan?
4. Vision and Susceptibility to Change
  - ❖ What is the desired future for Ardmore and how will private investment be leveraged to achieve the vision?
5. Policies & Strategies: Zoning, Parking, Affordable Housing, and Retail:
  - ❖ What are the regulatory changes and strategies that are needed to allow for desired development and encourage private investment?
6. Strategic Public Investment:
  - a. Multimodal Toolkit Treatments;
  - b. Multimodal Transportation Concept Plans;
    - ❖ How can the streets and public areas of Ardmore be transformed to facilitate all modes of transportation and create vibrant places for the community?
7. Conclusions & Next Steps
  - ❖ How will the Ardmore Master Plan be implemented?

### **Planning Commission Recommendations:**

The Planning Commission reviewed the draft at their February 27, 2023 meeting and are anticipated to provide a recommendation at their April 10, 2023 meeting. During the February review the Planning Commission expressed support for the following recommendations to be included in the final draft:

1. Any future zoning overlay(s) as contemplated by the Master Plan should be carefully crafted to give due regard to the impact of higher density development on specific existing conditions, neighborhood characteristics, historic resources, traffic patterns, and overall quality of life. For example, developments consisting of 4-6 stories may be appropriate in many areas within the overlay (e.g., between Lancaster Avenue and the railroad), but not in other areas (e.g., abutting single family homes). The zoning overlay should be a precision instrument. This could entail the creation of sub-zones with the overlay, creation of a 3-D model, or other methods to ensure that the impacts of a new zoning overlay are examined on a more micro-scale.
2. Remove recommendation for retail use separation as a less desirable use is preferable to a vacant use.
3. Zoning strategies should include a recommendation to include gathering space or privately owned public space for all new developments exceeding specified square footage.

4. A Private/Public Partnership for construction of a secondary garage structure should be considered. A future zoning taskforce should consider options for contributions strategies to encourage centralized town center parking.
5. Improvements on Rittenhouse Place for additional streetscape amenities, traffic calming, or bike lanes should give due regard to the need for parking, both short term and longer term, necessary to support businesses.
6. Include parking strategies aimed at protecting small businesses, including the establishment of a parking committee to consider on-going needed adjustments and incentives to encourage employee parking in underutilized locations and making on-street parking available to business customers.
7. Ardmore has one of the lowest tree equity scores in Lower Merion. The Master Plan should address the need for creation and maintenance of green space-i.e., green infrastructure-including to support shade trees. Any future zoning overlay should require greening. New developments over a certain size should require green space, such as courtyards or other areas, preferably where shade trees can be grown. Green spaces should be planned—not an afterthought.
8. Develop a streetscape maintenance and improvement plan for Ardmore, including providing green infrastructure for street trees.
9. Removal of the recommendation that code regulations could be reduced to enhance the financial feasibility of affordable unit. De-regulating development does not seem advisable. Preserving existing affordable housing should be a key consideration.
10. Recommendations in the Master Plan should incorporate reliable data supporting identified strategies, particularly data presented related to building height and parking utilization. Such data should be made readily available to the public.
11. The Master Plan should include images, particularly of traffic calming improvements, that reflect aspirational conditions. Because the Master Plan is a guiding document, it should not include images that we would not want to recreate in Lower Merion.
12. Inclusion of language that acknowledges that affordable housing strategies should be Township-wide and considered in all planning documents, not specific to Ardmore.

Additionally, the Planning Commission had mixed support for the following recommendation which will be further discussed at their April 10<sup>th</sup> meeting, with the outcome to be reported out by staff:

13. Remove reference to a 45-degree stepback related to building height, as the existing stepback requirement is sufficient.

Lastly, the Planning Commission's recommendation included the following guidance which is discussed in more detail below:

14. Improvements to Schauffele Plaza should give due regard to the need to provide vehicular access, short term, and handicapped parking to proximate businesses. While most parking could potentially be eliminated, some may be required to support businesses. Consideration should also be given to whether maintaining a vehicular throughway is beneficial to provide access to the One Ardmore parking garage.

## **Staff Recommendations:**

Staff is providing the following recommendations which are in addition to the Planning Commission's recommendations and are derived from both staff and public input on the draft:

1. **Additional Background:** Staff recommends adding more information to the plan to provide context for past planning efforts undertaken within the last 20 years. This should include acknowledging the change in zoning from C1/C2/ASDD to the MUST Overlay to the current VC/TC1, as well as a demographic analysis. This information will be critical for future users and implementers of the plan.
2. **Vision:** Staff recommends further refining the vision statement to reflect Ardmore's position as a town center for the Lower Merion community while also providing for local needs and services. The current vision references a village, which historically has been used to identify smaller neighborhood-focused commercial uses such as Gladwyne and Penn Valley. However, the 2016 Comprehensive Plan identified Ardmore as a Traditional Main Street, recognizing its central position, concentration of community services and amenities, transit access, and ability to serve the commercial needs of a larger portion of the township's population. Staff recommends that the scope be expanded to recognize Ardmore as a town center, while also recognizing its unique accessibility to the surrounding residential neighborhoods.
3. **Susceptibility to Change Map:** Staff recommends that the consultant team provide definitions and criteria for the different levels of susceptibility and justification for selecting specific properties based on those criteria. The map should help the public determine the desirability of change and help the future zoning task force better understand the reasoning and need.
4. **Housing:** Staff recommends that the applicant provide additional clarification on the identified strategies. The Township currently administers a housing rehab program, and staff would like clarification on whether the consultant means to expand on the current program or if this was an oversight. Additional information on establishing a housing trust and its advantages should be provided so that it can be further considered with future housing studies within the Township.
5. **Parking:** Staff recommends that a future zoning task force contemplate how fee-in-lieu parking could be achieved to leverage funding for the garage construction and public-private partnerships.
6. **Traffic Calming:** Several community members in North Ardmore have commented on the need for intersection improvements in the study area located at the intersections of Montgomery Avenue. Staff recommends that the plan identify the intersection of Montgomery and Woodside for improvement. Additionally, staff recommends providing a matrix to better understand which toolkit treatments would be appropriate for the identified intersections. This would enable staff to refer to the plan as changes are proposed incrementally.
7. **Implementation Plan:** Staff recommends revising the Implementation Plan to prioritize the design and engineering of Schaufele Green, establishing a parking committee, working with Ardmore Initiative to develop a streetscape maintenance and enhancement program, and developing a signage plan to bring more visibility to the parking garage.

In addition to the above recommendations, staff has compiled a list of typos and non-substantive items to be addressed with the final draft, which will be provided to the consultant team.

Staff would like to bring the following items to Board’s attention to further direct staff.

- A. Zoning: One the purposes of the master plan was to consider the economic viability of future investment in Ardmore given the existing TC1 zoning standards. While the plan includes recommendations for consideration, staff encountered significant public opposition to additional building height and traffic related to potential added density. Staff is supportive of the Planning Commission recommendation that any future zoning changes be carefully crafted to give due regard to the impact of higher density development on specific existing conditions, neighborhood characteristics, historic resources, traffic patterns, and overall quality of life and that the zoning overlay should be a precision instrument.
- B. Schauffele Green: While the concept of creating a centralized community space in Ardmore received significant support from community members, there was also concern about the loss of existing surface parking by small business owners. In response the consultant team provided two alternative layouts in the master plan. One shows full utilization of the site for community space and the other provides for a hybrid concept, maintaining some of the existing parking spaces, which can be converted or closed off for events.

Recognizing the value of this improvement to Ardmore, staff is eager to move forward with a Request for Proposals for the design and engineering of the space and would like the Board’s direction on their concept preference. If the hybrid model is preferred, staff would like to better understand the amount of parking the Board would like to see retained. The parking lot currently contains 78 spaces. Staff would prefer that any spaces to be retained serve short term parking needs for the surrounding local businesses.

If full utilization of the site is preferred by the Board, staff notes that Planning Commission recommendation #7 should not be supported, as it recommends providing vehicular access, short term, and handicapped parking, and consideration of a vehicular throughway.



Staff notes that there is precedent in Ardmore for the conversion of a parking lot to a community space. Suburban Square originally included a parking area which was later converted to courtyard and gathering space to serve the community and the surrounding businesses.

**V. Impact on Township Finances:**

There will be no impact on Township finances.

**VI. Staff Recommendation**

Staff recommends the Board consider the master plan and provide direction as needed.