



Urban Research & Development Corporation

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September 29, 2020

TO: Allentown City Councilmembers

FROM: URDC, Charlie Schmehl (cschmehl@urdc.com)

SUBJECT: **REQUEST FOR ZONING CHANGE ON LAND EAST OF S. ELMO ST.
AND SOUTH OF W. FAIRVIEW ST.**

Our firm is providing these comments on behalf of Pennsylvania Venture Capital, Inc. I am personally well familiar with the area because I have been a City of Allentown homeowner and resident for the last 34 years.

The land is currently zoned P Parks. That current zoning district does not allow a reasonable use of privately owned land, and mainly allows public parks and cemeteries. The applicant had discussed different alternatives with the City Planning Commission and the City Staff to allow reasonable uses of the property. The City's Planning Staff and City Planning Commission then both recommended that the current Pocket Neighborhood Development Option in the City's Zoning Ordinance be used, so the applicant's request was revised to follow their recommendation.

The land would be rezoned to the R-MP Medium Density Planned Residential district. This was the same zoning that was used for the development around the Wegman's supermarket in West Allentown and for townhouses across Tilghman Street from Wegman's. That zoning allows up to 6 townhouses per acre or up to 8 multi-family homes per acre. Then the Pocket Neighborhood Development Option would be allowed. This option allows up to 10 homes per acre, but does not allow apartments. The current expectation is that single family detached houses would be built that would be offered for sale. The Pocket Neighborhood Option requires that common open space be provided, and is intended to promote a neighborhood that encourages socialization among neighbors.

The City's new Comprehensive Plan describes a serious need for additional middle income housing in the City. Much of the new housing that is being constructed in the Lehigh Valley is not affordable to the average middle income family, particularly because prices have been rapidly rising. This project is an opportunity to provide affordable owner-occupied housing.

The adjacent land south of these properties is owned by the City of Allentown. The land that is proposed to be rezoned currently includes a storage facility on the northern lot and a former quarry on the southern lot, which has been used for clean fill. That fill has mainly been comprised of asphalt and concrete deposited by the City of Allentown's Public Works Department, as well as materials deposited as part of PennDOT projects. A Phase 1 Environmental Assessment was completed of the former quarry property in 2019 and did not identify any environmental contamination issues. Appendix G of the City's current Land Development Controls Ordinance requires subsurface investigations before a development is approved.

The expectation is that the new homes on the former quarry area would be built without basements and with a “mat slab” form of construction. This method involves a thick concrete foundation (such as 16 to 24 inches of concrete) on top of compacted stone under the entire footprint of each house. This method prevents uneven settling. The asphalt and concrete underneath would also be further crushed and compacted.

Significant unusual expenses would need to be incurred to improve this land for new homes. There would not be sufficient revenues from a low density residential development to cover those expenses, which is why we are requesting a medium density.

As seen on the map that was submitted to the City, only one narrow strip on the northwest corner of the northern lot is within the 100 year floodplain. While there are occasional flooding problems along part of S. St. Elmo Street, an access onto W. Fairview Street would allow access in all weather conditions.

A zoning revision is only the first step in the process. Any development would need to present detailed plans for stormwater management, grading, layout and street construction to the City for approvals as part of future steps. The construction of homes and their foundations would need proof of compliance with State Construction Codes.

Please contact us if there are any questions or comments.