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Montclair Council: New Parking Lot At Edgemont Park Not Senior-Friendly and A Vote To Move Lackawanna Plaza Project Along

By **Steven Maginnis** - May 23, 2018 16

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The Montclair Township Council meeting Tuesday night was dominated by the ongoing issue of the new parking facilities at Edgemont Park. At issue was how seniors could possibly use the new parking lot as currently designed, given that the township's activities for seniors are primarily held at the field house.

Collin Minert of the Montclair Senior Citizens Advisory Committee

Collin Minert of the Montclair Senior Citizens Advisory Committee argued that the parking lot as designed was too small and had too few spaces to accommodate not only the many residents 65 and older who use the field house for senior activities but also youth groups who also use the building. Minert noted that the field house's activities for seniors attracted as many as 10,000 senior visits in the 20-month period, many of them frequenting the facility between 9:30 a.m. and 4 p.m. on weekdays. The 12 parking spaces planned in the new parking area, he said, were woefully inadequate for both the elderly and for other people who may have trouble parking there, such as mothers with strollers, and he said that on-street parking would be difficult for seniors who chose not to park in the new lot. He was especially concerned with the planned parking spaces along a curved Belgian-block curb, which he said would be almost impossible for anyone to navigate, and he questioned if there would be enough room for senior buses stopping at the field house.

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Many residents took to the public comment to express agreement with Minert that the new parking facility would restrict access for many, but resident Penny Carey saw one silver lining. She hoped that it would expedite Montclair's efforts to find a centrally located, accessible site for a permanent senior facility. Councilor-at-Large Robert Russo said he could understand the frustration that many seniors have with the planned parking-lot renovations for Edgemont Park, saying that senior Montclair residents deserved a senior center, but he added that Edgemont Park's field house was never meant to be a permanent one, and he wanted to see a plan for the park that would make it available for all uses by all people.

Deputy Mayor / Second Ward Councilor Robin Schlager, whose ward includes Edgemont Park and who has had community meetings in the field house, defended the new parking improvements as adding to the beauty of the park, suggesting that it could be modified if there were any problems. Resident Virginia Cornue wanted to know why the township couldn't come up with a parking facility that was both attractive and functional. For his part, Mayor Robert Jackson said he was pleased with the overall improvements in Edgemont Park, citing the tremendous upgrades in lighting, as well as new benches and improved pathways that were far better than the decrepit amenities that had existed previously. He added that he appreciated the residents input over the parking facility, and Councilor Russo held out hope that some modifications could be made to it.

Meanwhile, the long-awaited housing ordinance ensuring a fairer and more equitable distribution of affordable housing that was passed on first reading on April 17 came up for a final vote.

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William Scott of the Montclair Housing Commission suggested a final change to the language of the ordinance regarding funds for rehabilitating properties for affordable housing. In the ordinance up for a vote, up to $10,000 was made available for each dwelling that needs to be rehabilitated; Scott proposed a $15,000 threshold. After the council spent a great deal of time deliberating over minor wording issues, Township Attorney Ira Karasick said the council could pass the housing ordinance as originally written and add an ordinance that implemented Scott's suggestion. Third Ward Councilor Sean Spiller asked if this second ordinance amending the original would delay implementation of the original; Karasick assured him it would not. Both ordinances passed 7-0, and Fourth Ward Councilor Renée Baskerville thanked Scott for his leadership on the housing issue.

At the last minute, like the Scott amendment to the affordable-housing ordinance, was a resolution supporting the current plan to redevelop Lackawanna Plaza into a new supermarket, which is currently under review by the Planning Board. The board hasn't voted on it yet, but the council, still recalling the long and interminable effort to redevelop the Hahne's property, wanted to show its support for getting the new supermarket built as well as respect and attention for the Fourth Ward residents and their needs. Dr. Baskerville said while it would be ideal to preserve as much of the old railway terminal as possible, she made it clear that she didn't want the process to drag on, and Councilor Spiller concurred by saying that development of the property would benefit his ward, the line between the two wards running near Lackawanna Plaza. Both councilors said much discussion had yielded positive results from compromising, including the preservation of the horse trough as a water-art element, but resident Frank Rubacky would have none of it. Rubacky said the resolution was problematic owing to the fact that the Planning Board had not finished hearing testimony on the parking, and he added that the current plan does not preserve enough of the Lackawanna terminal building. Between the supermarket and preservation, Rubacky said both were possible, and Historic Preservation Commission members Kathleen Bennett and David Greenbaum reiterated the need to strike a balance between the need for a supermarket in the Fourth Ward and a project that can save the railway terminal's train sheds and create a public space to benefit everyone.

Mayor Jackson reminded Rubacky that the Planning Bard had the final vote on the project and that any stand the council took was moot. Rubacky argued otherwise, saying the council still represented the residents and had appointed the Planning Board's members and fearing that the board members would feel pressure from the council. He thought it was not an example that the elected township leaders should set.

The mayor and councilors ended up spending several minutes debating the wording of the resolution, asking whether or not it should urge the Planning Board "to consider it ["it" being the Lackawanna project] favorably and with dispatch;" the council passed it 7-0 after removing the words "favorably" and "and." In a comment on a separate Baristanet article, Rubacky said the semantic debate was wasted time "that I, or anyone that watched it, will never get back. It was the life-span equivalent of smoking a pack of cigarettes."

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A first-reading ordinance entering Montclair into a government energy aggregation program with other Essex County communities was challenged by First Ward Councilor William Hurlock, who told Gray Russell, Montclair's environmental-policy coordinator, that he took a dim view of Montclair changing electricity suppliers without their knowledge and against their will. Russell said that PSE&G changes suppliers constantly, and that this ordinance would assure transparency regarding suppliers while guaranteeing a clean-energy source. Councilor Hurlock and Deputy Mayor Schlager were unconvinced, both voting against it while Mayor Jackson and the other four councilors voted for it.

The meeting began with the local chapter of the pro-gun-control group Moms Demand Action receiving a proclamation from Montclair recognizing June 1 as National Gun Violence Day to call attention to the numerous school shootings and other firearm murders in the country. Anyone interested in joining can reach out to the Essex County chapter of Moms Demand Action at momsdemandessexnj@gmail.com.

Members of the pro-gun-control group Moms Demand Action pose with the Montclair Township Council.

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train shed argument raised just the week before.

The Council boldly goes so far as to state the plan pays homage to the historic train station. Yes, homage was the word they used…a special honor or respect shown publicly.

Knowing that for five decades Montclair considered the train station historic. Knowing that a prior Council voted to place our own local historic designation and a landmark status on the entire train station…even the stanchions and concrete slabs. Yes, we technically could have done it sooner but note our ordinance, as a rule, doesn't recognize properties as historic if less than 75 years old. Anyway, I digress. Mr Stolar ignores the local designation by the then Mayor & Council.

Then there were the absurd semantics conversation brought on by Councilor Hurlock. The original part about the resolution directing the Planning Board to consider the application "favorably". Mr Hurlock's concern was not that the Council held this view. His concern was the legal exposure to actually putting it in writing. They just can't say this. The Council's intent was established by the draft and the quibbling was just applying legal correctness.

So, we have a Township Council acting as a body – not as residents – that formally inserts itself into a process not within their jurisdiction. Before the public or they hear the full presentation of the application. The presentation & testimony that is the only public record. That the public can't yet comment on; only ask questions at this stage. They did this rather than go to the 6/18 hearing and give public comment like the rest of us… saying they fully support a plan by a developer that will have provided expert testimony the train sheds are not historically designated.

And maybe the Council, unlike the Planning Board, considers themselves exempt from addressing in their resolution the obvious inconsistencies with elements of our Master Plan. A Master Plan that took 5 very long years – also all the twists and turns.

The Council's resolution now creates issues broader than those arising in this site plan. They went far beyond satisfying the wants or inequities towards a specific neighborhoods or a ward. They opened up governance issues. They created new policy. They created new practice & precedent. They created trust issues. They blurred roles & responsibilities. Whatever happens at Lackawanna will not change what the Council has brought upon itself and the township.

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WED 30 **Appropriate**
May 17 @ 8:00 pm - June 1 @ 10:30 pm

WED 30 **Joanne Ciervo's World of Black and White to Exhibit at the Montclair Public Library**
May 18 - May 30

WED 30 **College Women's Club Booksale Donations**
May 19 @ 9:30 am - August 25 @ 11:30 am

WED 30 **The List**
May 25 @ 10:00 pm - June 2 @ 10:00 pm

WED 30 **College Women's Club Booksale Donations**
May 26 @ 9:30 am - September 1 @ 11:30 am

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The previous alert at the Lincoln Tunnel to NY due to a disabled vehicle is no longer in effect. There may be residual delays. (09:45 AM) (sent Wed 05/30/18)

The Lincoln Tunnel to NY is experiencing a delay of 30 minutes due to a disabled vehicle. (09:31 AM) (sent Wed 05/30/18)

The previous alert at the Lincoln Tunnel to NJ due to a disabled vehicle is no longer in effect. There may be residual delays. (05:07 PM) (sent Tue 05/29/18)

The prior disabled truck inside the outbound Lincoln Tunnel (to NJ) has been cleared there are some residual delays for buses leaving PABT.