



Lower Merion Ward 2 Report

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BILLBOARDS COMING TO GLADWYNE & PENN VALLEY?

An outdoor advertising company recently proposed that it be allowed to erect new electronic billboards along I-76. The locations suggested are Township-owned properties:

- In *Gladwyne*, in the leaf composting facility west of the River Road/Waverly Road intersection (adjacent to Sentry Lane and Spring Mill Road); and
- In *Penn Valley/Belmont Hills*, on the "Croyle Property" off Mary Watersford and Centennial Roads.

Some background:

Current Township laws prohibit billboards except in the Light Industrial Zoning District, which is located along the Schuylkill River between Belmont Avenue and City Avenue.

Billboard controversy is not new to this Township. Nearly 15 years ago a billboard company applied to erect signs along Lancaster Avenue in Bryn Mawr, at locations within Haverford Township that would be very close to the Haverford/Lower Merion boundary, and visible to drivers and pedestrians from within Lower Merion Township. Residents of both Haverford and Lower Merion Townships strongly objected.

In response, in 2009 our Township intervened in litigation between Haverford Township and the billboard company, opposing any billboards along Lancaster Avenue. The Board of Commissioners passed a resolution at the time recognizing that billboards can adversely impact the visual environment and streetscape, and increase traffic accidents.

Affiliates of the same billboard company later proposed additional signs in Bryn Mawr and in Penn Valley/Belmont Hills, adjacent to the Croyle property. These applications remain pending with the Township, although are not permissible under current Zoning laws.

Most recently, the billboard company suggested that it would stop its efforts to put signs along Lancaster Avenue in exchange for the Township accepting 2 billboards at the sites along I-76 in Penn Valley/Belmont Hills and Gladwyne. That is the proposal currently being considered by the Township.

Community Questions:

The prospect of new billboards was introduced at recent meetings of the Gladwyne and Penn Valley Civic Associations. Residents raised a number of questions, among them:

- What is the benefit to the Township and its residents from more billboards?
- Would allowing additional billboards for one company lead to demand for additional signs from this company and other billboard companies?

My Thoughts:

- There is little indication of any benefit to the Township and its residents from new billboards anywhere in the Township. The reason this proposal is being considered is because it would presumably stop billboards from being erected within Haverford Township along Lancaster Avenue.
- The prospect of new billboards in Lower Merion Township is concerning wherever they might be located – whether in Bryn Mawr, Gladwyne, Penn Valley, or anywhere else. Signs can cause distracted driving, disturb the surrounding environment, and include undesirable content in their messaging. In Bryn Mawr they would disturb the small-town feel; in Gladwyne or Penn Valley, they would interrupt the natural scenery.
- I-76 billboards could also be particularly disruptive because there are currently no billboards along the Expressway between Belmont Avenue and West Conshohocken. Drivers enjoy the natural surroundings on the road, mostly free from distractions and visual clutter caused by billboards. And nearby residents, and those enjoying Gladwyne’s parks and trails, do not see billboard messages, light radiating from signs, or support columns.
- It is difficult to predict if allowing one company to erect 1 or 2 billboards would lead to demands for additional signs along the Schuylkill from other billboard companies. But the Township needs to anticipate that other companies would seek to place new signs. Additional litigation is possible. Once the door for new signs is opened, it may be hard to keep others out.
- Finally, the Township should not allow signs in one part of our community where they aren’t wanted, just to keep them away from another part of the Township where they aren’t wanted. This is particularly true in this situation, where the locations for the Lancaster Avenue signs would be in another township (Haverford Township) and another county (Delaware County). If Lower Merion doesn’t want new billboards, our community should stand united in its opposition.

Next Steps:

Township government is still in the early stages of this process. Additional billboards anywhere in Lower Merion would require new legislation, as current laws do not allow signs on Township property. If the Commissioners choose to pursue this matter, there would be several opportunities for public discussion before any decisions are made on where new signs should be located.

If you have a position on billboards in Gladwyne or at the Penn Valley/Belmont Hills (Croyle) site, it's important to make your opinions known. In Ward 2, both Gladwyne and Penn Valley Civic Associations have discussed billboards, and I expect those conversations will continue. Residents should also consider offering their views by emailing me and the other Township Commissioners.

DIVISION 2-1 POLLING PLACE MOVED TO BETH DAVID

The Polling Place for some Gladwyne residents is now *Beth David Congregation, 1130 Vaughan Lane*. If you live in Voting District 2-1 and previously voted at St. Christopher's Church or Gladwyne Firehouse, this change affects you.

Other polling locations remain the same. Division 2-2 still votes at Gladwyne Presbyterian Church, and Division 2-3 (formerly Oak Hill polling place) now votes at the Welsh Valley Middle School gymnasium (off of Hagys Ford Road).

BARKER MILL SOLD

There are 2 developments impacting Historic Barker Mill (1400 Mill Creek Road):

- (1) Pennsylvania Commonwealth Court overturned the Township's denial of the Mill owner's latest development application. The Board of Commissioners was ordered to approve that application, for 33 condominium units in the existing historic buildings and a new 54.4 ft. building to be constructed on the site. The owner now has until September 20, 2023 to file a final land development plan with the Township.
- (2) The Mill property changed ownership at the end of September. The new owner has the same right to develop the property according to the 33-unit approved application. Any material deviation from that plan would require the land development process to start over.

I am hopeful that the change in ownership will mean positive things for this long-neglected historic resource abutting Rolling Hill Park. The new owner has taken steps to clean up the property, although the buildings remain under threat of continued deterioration. The approved plan is too large for the site, but the recent court decision gives the owner the right to build it anyway. Legally we must allow this development plan to move forward.

However, should the owner wish to make material changes to the approved plan, or propose a different development, we can once again oppose any proposal that is similarly out of scale for the property and the surrounding area. The Mill property is currently zoned LDR1, which allows for only a

single-family residence. Allowing only one home may not be feasible, but any development involving more than a few residential units and new construction would probably also be unrealistic.

SEPTA BUS ROUTES THROUGH PENN VALLEY & GLADWYNE MAY END

SEPTA recently announced tentative plans to end bus service from Center City to/from Gladwyne Village and the Oak Hill. As part of SEPTA's "Bus Revolution" initiative, there would be no bus service anywhere in the Township. This change is being considered due to low ridership on the current routes.

More information about the "Bus Revolution" plan can be found at this link:

<https://www.septabusrevolution.com/draft-network/>

At this point SEPTA's plans are just preliminary – no decisions have been made. SEPTA plans a series of public hearings and open houses to discuss their plans. One open house is scheduled for **Tuesday, November 15th** from 5:30 until 7:30pm, at the Township Administration Building in Ardmore.

If you care about continued SEPTA bus service in Lower Merion, please attend, and consider sharing your thoughts with SEPTA and me. You can also email SEPTA at an address listed in the link above.

ILLEGAL ATVS, DIRT BIKES, & DRAG RACING

Many residents are aware that hundreds of illegal ATVs and dirt bikes occasionally pass through and disrupt the community. They come into the Township from Philadelphia and ride into Radnor and other western suburbs before returning to the City. The motorized vehicles favored by the participants are mostly illegal for street use, and they ride through traffic creating hazards both for motorists and themselves.

A newer illegal activity is drag racing. On a recent weekend 50-100 cars raced in a Bala parking lot late at night until LMPD broke them up.

These types of random incidents continue to plague our region, and other parts of the country. As part of addressing these incidents, officials from LMPD and other police departments recently met with Philadelphia PD and the State Police.

The solution lies in more aggressive enforcement of vehicle laws, particularly in Philadelphia. But new legislation must also be passed in Harrisburg to make these activities a crime, so vehicles may be confiscated and offenders can face meaningful consequences. Lower Merion cannot solve this problem alone. But we will continue to work on effective means of stopping these dangerous activities on our streets before things get worse.

Please feel free to share this newsletter with your neighbors!