



Girard Estates Neighbors Association

Providing a voice for the community

GENA, West Passyunk and GEAR Joint Zoning Meeting

December 4, 2012 at GAMP School 7-9 P.M.

TOPIC: Use Variance for Check Cashing and Pawn Shop at 2216 W. Passyunk Ave.

Toki Rehder, co-chair of GENA Zoning Committee, chaired the meeting. She began the meeting by reminding people that the GENA Zoning Committee has public meeting on the second Wednesday of the month at Prudential Bank.

Ms. Rehder introduced the GENA Zoning Committee (John Longacre, John Christinzio, Alan Moore, Tom Janke, Gaetano Picirilli and Dan Bartoli) the GEAR representatives (Jodi Della Barba, Cynthia Gamba, Elaine Fera, Mark Leuzzi), and the West Passyunk Civic Association representatives (Andrew Pinkham and Jessica Gould). Jodi Della Barba mentioned that a representative for Kenyatta Johnson and for Maria Donatucci were also in attendance.

Ms. Rehder went over the meeting rules and the process whereby the civic associations deliberate and vote on the zoning issue and send a letter to the Philadelphia Zoning Board of Adjustment which has the final decision-making authority in these matters.

Ms. Rehder turned the meeting over to Susan Baldino, the applicant for a zoning variance and allotted 15 minutes for her presentation. Her lawyer, Conrad Benedetto, detailed the variance to establish a check cashing and pawn shop at 2216 W. Passyunk Ave. He said the pawnshop would deal in jewelry, precious metals, coins, and collectibles, a more upscale business than people perceive. The business would be family-owned and operated and passed down to her family. He pointed out renderings of the building. He stated there is no correlation between pawnshops and increase in crime. Mr. Benedetto asked for support for this variance request.

Questions from the Zoning Committees:

Q. From West Passyunk: Any plans for same-day payday loans?

A. No plans.

Q. From GEAR: Is the family willing to revert back to the original zoning if the family sold the business?

A. Yes, they are willing to revert back to original zoning if sold to a third party. But there are no plans to do so.

Q. From GENA: Explain why the initial request was denied.



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A. Toki read the denial of the variance request from the City: The proposed regulated uses, check cashing agency and pawn brokerage establishment, are prohibited within 500' of residential homes and school up to grade 12 and within 1000 feet of another existing regulated use are prohibited in this zoning district.

Q. From GENA: Business Plan – can you talk about it, and about your business hours?

A. Mr. Benedetto said business hours would be 8:30 A.M. – 6 P.M. Monday-Saturday with extended hours during holidays. How many customers they anticipate, they cannot say at this time.

Q. GENA: Would they consider adding a proviso that GENA would have the final say on what is constructed at the site. This would include signs.

A. Mr. Benedetto said that this meeting is for the use variance. When asked if that was a 'No', he said it was a "I don't know."

Q. GENA: Have they considered whether the business being proposed would benefit the residents of the area?

A. Mr. Benedetto said the business would benefit all of South Philadelphia.

Q. Any steps being taken to ensure that stolen property would not be handled at the store? And will firearms be sold?

A. Mr. Benedetto said there would be no firearms. And a new city ordinance makes it more restrictive if stolen property is found. The owners have a stake in making sure what is taken in is legal.

Q. GEAR: what plans do you have for security?

A. Mr. Benedetto said the property would be very well lit; it will have a state of the art security system and security people.

Q. W. Passyunk: What experience do the owners have running a business such as this?

A. Mr. Benedetto said they will employ people with experience and will learn from them as owner-operators.

Q. GENA: When you go to the zoning board, you will have to present a hardship in requesting the variance. Can you tell us what that hardship is?

A. Mr. Benedetto said the hardship is that the property has been vacant for 7 years and that they have been unable to find a suitable tenant.



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Q. GENA: Have you investigated any other business such as a high-end jewelry store or a consignment shop?

A. Mr. Benedetto said that the realtor was unable to secure a tenant along those lines. He said the area is not suitable for a high-end business.

Q. GEAR: Save-a-lot and Goodwill properties are poorly maintained and dirty outside. How will the applicants keep this area neat?

A. Mr. Benedetto said that Susan maintains the area now. It is neat.

Q. GEAR. What age would be allowed to come into your business?

A. Mr. Benedetto said they must be at least 18 years of age.

Questions from the community:

Q. How many tenants will be at the property?

A. Mr. Benedetto said there would be 2 businesses, with no tenants.

Q. Why don't you change the name to check cashing and coins? Are the people qualified to run a coin exchange?

A. Mr. Benedetto said they are qualified. They will not use the name pawnshop on the business.

Q. If the original request was denied because of the proximity to a school, how can we now allow a variance? Why isn't Susan talking to us as the business owner?

A. Ms. Rehder said L & I denied the request; the process is to file an appeal. The Zoning Board of Adjustment will consider the request for a variance along with letters from the RCOs.

Q. Do the residents have a say?

A. Ms. Rehder said individuals could go to the hearing. It is January 3. Mr. Christinzio said the zoning code has been altered. When an appeal comes down, the city contacts the RCOs. RCOs have community meeting and send letters pro or con on the issue. But individuals can go to the hearing and voice their opinions. You can also voice your opinion here at this meeting and we will deliberate after the meeting. Your opinion is being recorded.



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Q. A business owner on Passyunk Ave. expressed concern about bringing in a business that does not enrich the area. Even if the business doesn't sell stolen merchandise, it will still be attracting people who steal merchandise in an attempt to sell it. She believes in the area and doesn't believe in a defeatist attitude like: "the area is not suited for high-end business is the way to go" [Applause]

A. Mr. Benedetto said the owner would be investing a lot of money in the neighborhood. No statistical proof that pawnshops increase crime.

Q. If this is not going to make anything worse, it is certainly not going to make anything better. [Applause]

A. Mr. Benedetto said to give it a chance. It will help the neighborhood. It's a family-owned business.

Q. Philip's Steak is clean and well run. However, can't you find something better at the proposed site that would add to the community? We already have a check-cashing business. What you're proposing will compound the problem. This is the worst possible thing you could do to a residential area. [Applause] It's too close to a school; it has homes around it.

Q. I worked in center city. Doesn't believe for a minute that a check cashing/pawn shop would not increase crime in the area. After check cashing and pawnshops went into the area where I worked, I was mugged twice. It's time to take back the neighborhood. We don't want any more of this type of business. [Applause]

Q. Has a concern about lack of accountability of the applicant. She is unwilling to speak to the community; there has been no outreach to the neighbors; and there is rumor about straw license for others who are not suitable for this license. How will the applicant be accountable? Will there be a prohibition against anyone with a criminal background operating the business?

A. Mr. Benedetto said that these are just rumors. Susan will be there on a daily basis, several hours a day. It's a regulated business and you have to pass background test.

Q. Why do we have these laws regulating the business, if it is such a great business?

A. It is regulated because law enforcement wants to keep the element of crime down.

Q. President of South Philadelphia Business Association said that this would create jobs and be good for the community.



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Q. A relative newcomer who loves this neighborhood said she would not have bought in this neighborhood if there had been a pawnshop. Girard Estate can do better. [Applause] She is calling for an open and transparent process from all of the associations represented there. Meeting minutes and record of voting by individual should be posted to websites. [Applause]

A. Ms. Rehder said that the GENA Zoning Committee would be discussing how to make its votes public at the next zoning meeting and invited everyone to attend. Everything is posted to GENA's website: www.GENA001.com. GEAR's Jodi Della Barba said that there are also petitions going around and they have to make sure that everyone is heard. Their decision goes to the full board. They don't have a web site but if she gets your email, she will send their decision. Andy Pinkham from W. Passyunk said that they would forward their decision via email also.

Q. Is the intent to buy coins and jewelry in a nice store?

A. Yes. Coins, jewelry, collectibles.

Q. Why have renovations not been done prior to this to secure suitable tenants? It sounds like the business plan is unwritten and shaky. Is there a way we can check out the business plan?

A. There is not a published business plan, but he submitted a model that is posted on the GENA website.

Q. Do the associations other than GENA have websites that we can go to for the decisions?

A. W. Passyunk has a website. GEAR does not have a website, but has email.

Q. What kind of businesses applied to do business at that site? Why not renovate before this?

A. Mr. Benedetto said he did not know what other businesses were interested; they hired a realtor to do that for them. Susan has had some illness and so did her mother. She is just getting back on her feet and ready to renovate.

Q. The objection is just to an idea, not based in fact.

Q. No one is here from the school.

A. Dr. Carr had a family emergency; Rachelle Richards was there to gather information for him.

Q. Can we have a show of hands of those here that don't want these businesses?

[Show of hands] Note: The informal show of hands indicated that an overwhelming majority of those present were against the proposed use (check cashing and pawnshop).



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A. Mr. Benedetto said he has more than a 100 names with people in support of the variance on a petition.

Q. Don't want dregs of society coming into the neighborhood. Open something that is going to be beneficial: a little coffee shop, a diner. The building is beautiful. [Applause]

Q. The applicant's property is always clean.

Q. How many spaces will there be for parking?

A. 8-10 cars maybe.

Q. Applicant lives in Packer Park, not in Girard Estate. Prefer that she take this type of business to Packer Park. [Applause]

A. We're all from South Philadelphia.

Q. How much thought went into a pawn shop and check cashing? That's the only thing that came to your mind? Did you think of anything else for the community?

Q. I spent 20 minutes getting signatures against the pawnshop and I'll go toe to toe with you on the petitions; I'll go door to door. I don't want that to go unaddressed. [Applause]

Q. No one came around asking about it. There's already a check-cashing place right across the street.

Q. Will anyone on the zoning committees having a relationship with the applicants recuse himself from voting on this matter?

A. GENA – yes they have such a procedure. GEAR – no one has a personal relationship

Q. Where did the lawyer get his facts about pawnshops?

A. Mr. Benedetto said his office researched it. He will have to get the info.

Q. No one has come to my house to sign a petition.

A. Anyone can start a petition and send it.

Q. Why is the police captain here? Can he say a few words about the issue?

A. I was invited as part of the community. There is a lot of policing that goes on with pawnshops. It requires a lot of extra police work.