

POTTSTOWN CITIZENS FOR Enlightened LEADERSHIP

Open space, covert decision-making

An engineering firm hired by Upper Pottsgrove Township makes a lucid argument for building a \$5.5 million municipal complex on the former Smola farm at Evans and Moyer roads.

The 36.5-acre tract, purchased by the township in 2009 backed by dedicated open space funds, is currently leased to a farmer growing soybeans.



Commentary by
Thomas Hylton

Just 1.2 acres of the site — about 3% of its total land area — will be used for the municipal complex, including surface parking. The township will allow

meadows and forested areas to naturalize the remainder of the property, thus increasing both animal and plant biodiversity. This will render the area environmentally superior to its existing monoculture use.

Moreover, the public cannot access the ground at present. If the township decides to create a network of trails through the land, the municipal parking lot will provide safe access to the public.

These are worthy arguments, and might well have generated favorable public opinion when the commissioners first considered the project in 2020.

Instead, a three-commissioner majority kept the project under wraps and unveiled it as a fait accompli in August 2022. At that time, commissioners chairman Trace Slinkerd said the timeline for the complex, from design through construction, would be 18 to 24 months.

Slinkerd said the commissioners had been discussing the construction of a new municipal building for more than two years, “and we have talked about that in communications to residents.”

Yet Mercury reporter Evan Brandt could find no mention of the proposed project in the township’s newsletters or official minutes going back to 2020.

Slinkerd has the support of commissioners Don Read and Hank Llewellyn. Commissioners Cathy Paretti and Dave Waldt are opposed, especially since the public was never given a chance to weigh in on the proposal.

There is some question whether the project is legal. In February, former state representative Kate Harper, who was also chairman of the Montgomery County Lands Trust, filed a lawsuit on behalf of two Upper Pottsgrove residents challenging the township’s right to use any of the Smola tract for municipal offices.

She asked for an injunction to prevent any more township money to be spent on the project.

Funds used to purchase the property was borrowed, with proceeds from an earned income tax earmarked by voters for open space to be used to pay back the loan.

However, the township has since allocated some of the proceeds from selling its sewer system last June to pay off the Smola loan, and the majority commissioners contend they have the right to use the property as they propose. They say both the former and current township solicitors gave their blessings to the plan.

In any case, a Montgomery County judge rejected the request for an injunction, and by the time the case wends its way through the courts, construction might well be completed.

Meanwhile, the commissioners canceled their scheduled March meetings, saying they may meet the last week of March or just wait until April.

Of course, the behavior of the commissioner majority has been arrogant and outrageous — an affront to the democratic process.

But they have the votes, and more than two years left on their terms. Upper Pottsgrove has already been carved up into so many disjointed subdivisions, farming is already fast becoming an anachronism.

It’s not the first time power will triumph over principle.



SMOLA TRACT, Moyer Road.