

**WHITEMARSH TOWNSHIP
PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING (IN-PERSON)
MEETING MINUTES
February 10, 2026
6:30 PM**

Attendees/Participants: Carmen Bushong, Sherri Glantz Patchen, Scott Quitel, Dave Shula (Vice Chair), Donald Norbeck, Krista Heinrich (Township Engineer), Charlie Guttenplan (Director of Planning and Zoning), Deanna Williams (Solicitor's Office), Vince Manuele (BOS Liaison), Samantha Zrillo (Township Planner), Timothy Konetchy (MCPC)

1. CALL TO ORDER Vice Chair Shula called the meeting to order at 6:33 PM.

2. ANNOUNCEMENTS & CORRESPONDENCE

- Mr. Guttenplan noted a modification of the agenda, and that there was a new business item that won't be discussed; it was put on the agenda prematurely due to a communication error. Mr. Guttenplan indicated that we will wait until FEMA replied with a final determination on the floodway line modification to proceed with a discussion of a possible conservation easement purchase for the Highpoint project. Once that is received it will be put back on the agenda. The handouts tonight will be redistributed when this is on the agenda, Mr. Guttenplan explained that if the FEMA approval is not granted, then the issue is void and the developer would have to start from scratch.
- Mr. Guttenplan reminded everyone to speak directly into the microphone.

APPROVAL OF MINUTES

- January 13, 2026

A Commission member suggested amending the meeting minutes by revising the language on page three and adding a sentence before the last paragraph stating, "A commission member commented that since zoning relief would be required for either density or demolition, given the preference to take down the buildings, this may be a better path." A Commission member also commented on public attendance, asking if attendees are always listed, both speaking and non-speaking. Mr. Guttenplan explained that we have done it with and without the list of residents attending and it can be removed. The Commission member suggested changing it to "public comment" and removing all references to "residents" to keep it consistent, as well as making the address for Sydelle Zove upper case.

On page four at the bottom, the reference to the 60-day review period was noted as confusing, so deleting "beyond the 60 day review period" would make it clearer, and adding a new sentence stating, "It wasn't clear what the impact of the responses would be, given the 60 day review period had passed." On page five, in the first full paragraph, it should be revised for clarity to state that the engineer suggested adding an asterisk at the bottom noting that the Planning Commission is not comfortable answering some of the questions. In the paragraph beginning with "Mr. Guttenplan mentioned," the third sentence should read, "While the questions were discussed with the developer" for clarity. Regarding the motion, Ms. Glantz Patchen suggested to remove "agree with the presented info," and change it to "as described above". There were also two misspellings of names in the third paragraph: Tim Doll should be corrected to Tom Doll, and Dave Shula was misspelled at the bottom of the first page.

Mr. Norbeck made a motion to approve the minutes, and Ms. Bushong seconded. Motion carried 5-0.

6. ZONING HEARING BOARD APPEALS (None)

7. CONDITIONAL USE APPLICATIONS

- CU #01-26 Fort Washington Real Estate, LLC; 451 Bethlehem Pike; Conditional Use for a medical/dental office & for possible parking reduction

This is an application in the VC1 district. Mr. Celso Leite, Esq. is here to make a presentation on the property. Dr. Zebrick would like to open a dental office at 451 Bethlehem Pike, which was originally the old Wissahickon Hall building.

Celso Leite, from Hamburg Rubin explained that much of the building is vacant, but it's difficult to find long term tenants for the space. Conditional use approval is needed in order to do renovations and adaptive use. Mr. Leite, Esq. mentioned that this is not the first time Wissahickon Hall has been before the Township, about 10 years ago they went before the board for a lot line adjustment with the adjacent property. Now the property relies on 455 Bethlehem Pike for parking.

Dr. Zebrick wants to bring his orthodontist's office to the building. He serves clients of all ages and is looking to open a second location. Dr. Zebrick is looking to start on the first floor, then gradually works his way up to the second. They don't take walk ins, and are by appointment only, so no overly intensive use. Their office hours are 8:30-5:30 pm, and peak hours are 3-5:30 after school.

Mr. Leite, mentioned that the dental office is permitted to the VC1 district by conditional use, and they comply with the criteria and compatible with commercial character of the neighborhood. The office will not have a harmful effect on local pedestrian or vehicular traffic. Mr. Leite, also talked how the dental office will not produce any objectional noise, lighting, glare, heat, ventilation, smoke, fumes, vapors, dirt, gases, radioactive or electrical disturbances.

Mr. Leite, continued that there will not be any adverse effects like visual impacts on adjacent property, it won't interrupt or burden any public services. Mr. Leite, talked about the review letter received from Mr. Guttenplan and the memo from the Fire Marshal.

A Commission member asked if Dr. Zebrick would be making any site modifications. A Commission Member suggested an ADA ramp may be necessary. Dr. Zebrick and Mr. Leite, replied that there would be signage and that an existing ramp may require alterations because it is too steep for ADA compliance. A question was asked for more information on the parking easement. That easement was set in place due to the potential redevelopment of the area when the lot line change took place in 2015; another developer is contemplating a new mixed use development. So, if Dr. Zebrick buys the building then he has parking rights based on the easement that's been recorded. If the developer decides to develop the properties around it, they will have to work with Dr. Zebrick to make sure there is adequate parking for the building, possibly by new easement.

Mr. Guttenplan mentioned a Zoning Hearing Board case, when the lot line change went through, and one of the variances was for the number of parking spaces. The number of parking spaces hasn't changed, yet the parking requirements have, so this building has a lesser requirement than it did in 2015. Mr. Guttenplan mentioned that all offices used to have 1 parking space per 200 sq. feet, whereas now professional offices have 1 space per 250 sq. feet, and only medical facilities have 1 per 200. A Commission member asked if the parking spaces are sufficient for Dr. Zebrick, and Mr. Leite, replied that it would be because the office is by appointment only, which means there will be more control over the traffic.

A Commission member asked if the applicant would use the ground floor, so what's the use for the rest of the building. Mr. Leite, replied that there is an office on the third floor along with a therapist, and the second floor is being renovated. A Commission Member asked if Dr. Zebrick would become the landlord, Dr. Zebrick replied yes. A Commission member asked how many parking spaces there are, Mr. Leite, Esq. replied 27. A Commission Member asked what's on the first floor currently, Mr. Leite, Esq. replied that it used to be a financial services office.

Mr. Quitel made a motion to recommend approval of the conditional use. Mr. Norbeck seconded the motion. Motion carried 5-0.

Mr. Guttenplan mentioned that this will now go to the Board of Supervisors for a public hearing at their March 12th meeting.

8. SUBDIVISION &/OR LAND DEVELOPMENT APPLICATIONS (none)

9. OLD BUSINESS

- Continued Discussion of the Conservation Design Overlay District—Tim Konetchy, AICP from MCPC

Mr. Konetchy stated that he would be providing an update on the 2026 program, specifically outlining progress on several miscellaneous items, before returning to discussion of the Conservation Design Overlay project, which he noted is the major project for the year. He explained that while there were not many formal deliverables at this stage for the miscellaneous items, there were several updates to report. Following last month's meeting, Mr. Konetchy met with Charlie and Sam to prioritize a handful of miscellaneous items. He stated that the primary item stems from the Planning Commission's discussion last month regarding the Floodplain Conservation Overlay District. He began discussions with Environmental Planning Manager Jon Lesher (at MCPC) regarding the matter. Mr. Konetchy explained that the FEMA model ordinances for the floodplain fringe would allow residential uses, as Whitemarsh is largely located within the floodplain fringe, and therefore adoption would ultimately be a policy judgment for the Township. He noted that staff must conduct additional research to determine whether this approach is the right fit for the Township at this stage. This includes reviewing what neighboring municipalities are doing and evaluating available data and anecdotal evidence, including photographs documenting flooding along the river. He added that around 2014, the County prepared model floodplain ordinances based on FEMA guidance, and staff is currently gathering all relevant information before bringing forward recommendations.

Mr. Konetchy further reported that Mr. Lesher has been invited to attend an upcoming Planning Commission meeting. He indicated that Mr. Lesher would like to provide an update on a range of environmental planning and sustainability initiatives, including recent cooperation with Chester County and DVRPC regarding solar energy, a forthcoming product from the County's new sustainability office, and also mentioned issues related to new data centers, which he described as a significant topic both regionally and nationally. Mr. Konetchy stated that this presentation would likely occur in April if not at the next meeting, and that staff hopes to compile all floodplain-related information for discussion at that time.

Turning to the Spring Mill Mixed Use District and the Transit-Friendly Design Overlay District, Mr. Konetchy explained that when these topics were initially introduced, staff anticipated receiving a sketch plan application. He reported that a sketch plan has since been submitted and that staff has received a list of potential text amendments from the applicant. He noted that these items appear on the bottom of the agenda for potential discussion next month. With the districts now in an amendment phase, Mr. Konetchy stated that the Township has the opportunity to consider its own edits in addition to those proposed by the applicant.

Regarding the Village Commercial District, Mr. Konetchy stated that he has begun reviewing provisions related to shared access, which he described as an important strategy for promoting cross-access easements and reducing curb cuts as redevelopment occurs. While he believes this is the appropriate time to address those changes, he noted that the draft is not yet at a stage where it is ready to present and anticipates bringing it forward next month. He added that Charlie and Sam will also review conditional use provisions to determine whether certain uses, such as medical offices, might be permitted by right rather than requiring conditional use approval in each instance. Mr. Konetchy also reported that staff have begun meeting regarding off-street parking and loading requirements and has already made progress on that effort. He explained that he plans to review parking requirements comprehensively, noting that the Township has recently updated parking standards in various districts. He observed that there is a broader national trend toward reducing or eliminating minimum parking requirements, particularly in boroughs that are actively pursuing such changes, and that staff have been compiling significant data on the topic.

Finally, Mr. Konetchy addressed the solar energy systems item (mandating Township Engineer review for proposed efficiency), stating that he has reviewed the existing regulation, which currently

appears as a single paragraph indicating that its elimination would be straightforward. He expressed confidence that the remaining miscellaneous items can be addressed by the end of the year and concluded his update.

A Commission member asked whether the Township could prioritize the overlay items in a way that would streamline interactions with government and reduce recurring issues. The member also inquired about establishing key performance indicators and a tracking system to monitor outcomes over time and identify areas where regulations may be too permissive or require adjustment. Mr. Konetchy replied that it was a great idea and that the Planning Commission could identify the metrics to use for this type of endeavor. A Commission member mentioned that during prior work they were trying to avoid undue burden on both citizens and also the zoning board, that way they could track it and say it resulted in better service for the government and citizens.

Mr. Konetchy stated that, similar to the off-street parking and loading updates, the Floodplain Conservation District rose to the top of the priority list due to its significance, while the remaining items are generally organized in priority order. He confirmed that as each item advances, staff will incorporate performance metrics to help track effectiveness and ensure nothing is overlooked.

Mr. Konetchy then transitioned to the Conservation Design Overlay (CDO) update, explaining that the goals of any replacement district should align with the legislative intent of both the existing CDO and the draft Open Space Conservation Overlay (OSCO). He noted that while the original intent of the CDO remains sound, it has fallen short in practice and needs refinement. He emphasized that all zoning amendments must generally implement the Township Comprehensive Plan, and the Planning Commission plays a role in interpreting its vision and implementation strategies. He summarized the key Comprehensive Plan objectives guiding this effort as preserving sensitive natural resources (i.e.- steep slopes, riparian corridors, wetlands, woodlands, wildlife habitats, and scenic viewsheds), ensuring that clustering regulations produce high-quality design rather than simply meeting minimum density or open space requirements, evaluating whether a mix of housing types could promote diversity and greater site flexibility, and requiring meaningful greenway and trail connections so that new developments are not isolated from surrounding neighborhoods or the regional trail network. He also stressed the importance of simplifying the zoning ordinance to make it more user-friendly and written in clear, plain language.

Regarding the OSCO draft, Mr. Konetchy explained that it was prepared by a steering committee and brought to the Planning Commission in early 2022, and that staff is currently working from the April 2022 version. He reviewed its primary components, including expanded legislative intent language with specific references to the Comprehensive Plan and climate change mitigation, updated applicability standards, use regulations largely focused on single-family detached dwellings with significant open space preservation, revised site capacity and density calculations, a large-lot option, enhanced design standards emphasizing clustering, scenic view protection provisions, and standard conservation easement and maintenance requirements.

Mr. Konetchy highlighted several ways in which the OSCO differs from the current CDO, including the addition of a 10-acre minimum tract size, more detailed scenic view protection language addressing natural landmarks and public views, and a restructured method for calculating site capacity and density. He explained that the OSCO approach applies open space requirements to the full site before determining constrained land and buildable area, whereas the current CDO calculates these elements differently. He noted that staff intends to run side-by-side calculations using example properties to better understand how each method affects development yield and land preservation outcomes and will present those comparisons at a future meeting to help guide policy decisions.

A Commission Member asked are there any times where they result in other appreciable differences in calculation. Mr. Konetchy replied that he had just done this type of calculation for Upper Frederick Township using draft regulations based on an MCPC model ordinance called the 'Rural Preservation District' from 2006. Mr. Konetchy explained that this concept operates similarly to the CDO and OSCO draft but would apply to any property containing significant natural features. He stated that the approach begins with the gross acreage, then subtracts constrained lands—such as areas with high water tables or shallow bedrock—to determine the net developable area. He noted that he conducted a preliminary analysis using example eighty-acre farm parcels

associated with Planning Commission members and indicated that staff can run those same parcels through both calculation methods to compare how each system ultimately affects development yield and land preservation outcomes.

A Commission Member asked why OSCO drafters went with a different process or a different approach to calculating maximum permissible density to build. Steve Kaufman (Harts Ridge Road) replied that it was a desire to maximize the percentage of open space and ensure that all constrained land was properly accounted for as part of required open space.

Mr. Konetchy stated that the next step is to test and compare the different calculation methods, noting that they vary somewhat from the Township's current model ordinances, particularly given local constraints such as shallow seasonal high water tables, shallow bedrock, and diabase geology. He emphasized that the Township must strike a balance between preserving natural features and avoiding regulations that make development infeasible. He added that smaller lot sizes may be a logical solution when significant open space is preserved, as residents would rely more on shared greenways and trail systems than on large private yards.

Mr. Konetchy explained that staff will analyze existing developments constructed under the current CDO by reviewing both approved plans and built results, then compare those outcomes to what would have occurred under the OSCO draft, other model ordinances, or a potential hybrid approach. He stated that this analysis will help determine which natural resources are most important to preserve, how they should be defined and inventoried, and how detailed those requirements should be—such as whether to broadly preserve woodland acreage or require detailed tree inventories above a certain diameter. He noted that staff will also review best practices from other municipalities and planning organizations, including cluster subdivision models used elsewhere in Pennsylvania, and will continue drafting, testing, and refining provisions until an appropriate framework is reached.

Mr. Konetchy concluded that, over the coming months, staff will continue refining the CDO while also pursuing public outreach, potentially through an open house format, to present existing conditions, proposed legislative concepts, and illustrative site plans to the community. He stated that the overall goal is to improve development quality, enhance preservation outcomes, and reduce unnecessary complexity in the review process.

A Commission member commented on the importance of carefully testing and comparing the various density and site capacity calculation methods, recognizing that local environmental constraints must be considered while maintaining a practical balance between preservation and development feasibility. The member agreed that analyzing existing CDO developments, comparing them to the OSCO draft and other models, and reviewing best practices would help clarify priorities for natural resource protection and appropriate design standards.

The Commission member also supported continued refinement of the ordinance through drafting and testing, along with public outreach—such as an open house—to gather input and ensure the revised district improves development quality while simplifying the review process.

Mr. Konetchy agreed that the ordinance must clearly define areas of interest and ensure that required connections are meaningful rather than superficial. He emphasized that preservation should focus not only on the size of woodland areas but also on tree maturity, ecological value, and connectivity to surrounding natural features, rather than isolated stands of trees. Mr. Konetchy noted that the Township can rely on existing plans to identify priority trail connections, viewsheds, and significant natural resources, while also planning for future development to ensure long-term connectivity. He added that the ordinance should clearly outline the legal mechanisms necessary to secure those connections, even if a property initially appears isolated.

A Commission member suggested incorporating a GIS mapping component on the Township website to visually overlay zoning districts and identify priority open space areas the Township is seeking to protect. The member noted that mapping valued forested areas, trail corridors, and other natural resources would allow the Commission to be more intentional and strategic, rather than relying solely on broad regulatory standards. The member added that this approach could help

determine whether stronger or more targeted measures are needed to meaningfully connect isolated open space areas in alignment with the Comprehensive Plan. Mr. Konetchy replied that he would map sensitive natural features using GIS and bring a series of maps to a future Planning Commission meeting for consideration.

A Commission member emphasized that the ordinance revisions should be driven by clearly defined outcomes, particularly maximizing connectivity and thoughtful site design, and that the tools created must be simple, practical, and easy for developers to understand and apply. The member noted that developers often approach projects with a narrow focus and may not naturally prioritize conservation or connectivity, so the Township's regulations should proactively guide them toward those outcomes rather than assume that sensitivity. The member further suggested reviewing past developments to identify where better tools or clearer standards could have led to improved conservation results and using those lessons to craft provisions that produce measurable, real-world improvements rather than relying solely on strong policy language. Mr. Konetchy agreed that the ordinance should clearly and consistently define open space standards to avoid ambiguity and ensure predictable expectations for developers and the Planning Commission.

A Commission member acknowledged that developers are motivated by return on investment and will naturally seek to maximize units, and that this economic reality must be recognized. However, the members emphasized that while the Township should not be adversarial, ecological and long-term planning goals cannot be secondary to financial considerations. The member expressed a desire for clearer tools that guide better development outcomes upfront, balancing economic interests with environmental stewardship rather than creating conflict during the review process.

A Commission member stated that clearer, more user-friendly standards could help foster more constructive discussions with developers and avoid repetitive disputes over technical compliance. The member noted that relying solely on narrow interpretations—such as meeting arborist or Shade Tree requirements—may satisfy the letter of the ordinance but not advance broader conservation goals related to ecological function and connectivity. The member emphasized the need to address these recurring issues directly in the ordinance to encourage more positive and outcome-focused interactions going forward.

Mr. Konetchy responded that expectations need to be clearly established upfront, particularly by referencing the Comprehensive Plan and the notable natural features identified within it. He indicated that grounding the ordinance in those adopted policy documents will help set a clear framework for applicants and reduce uncertainty during the review process.

Steve Kaufman (Harts Ridge Rd) made a comment on one of the cut outs of Federick Douglas. He then stated that while the Commission is considering more prescriptive standards—particularly around forest health, connectivity, and ecological value—the more subjective and difficult those criteria are to quantify, the harder they are to enforce clearly. He suggested that the strongest prescriptive tools may instead be firm open space requirements and clearly defined net-out calculations, which would provide leverage for the Planning Commission to negotiate better site outcomes.

Mr. Kaufman also expressed concern that, historically, the Zoning Hearing Board has not consistently upheld environmental protections, noting that riverfront setback requirements have at times been reduced, and emphasized the importance of continued education and alignment across Township bodies. Lastly, he suggested exploring incentives such as workforce housing bonuses or flexibility for twin homes and smaller lots, viewing these as potential opportunities to achieve both ecological restoration and greater equity within large redevelopment sites.

10. NEW BUSINESS

- Discussion of Potential Township Acquisition of Open Space/Conservation Easement at 1001 Washington Street (former David's Bridal property)
(Removed from this agenda at start of meeting)

11. PLANNING COMMISSION MEMBER COMMENTS

12. PUBLIC COMMENT FOR NON-AGENDA ITEMS (none)

13. ADJOURNMENT

Mr. Shula made a motion to adjourn the meeting. Ms. Glantz Patchen seconded the motion. Motion carried 5-0. Meeting adjourned at 7:38 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Charles L. Guttenplan, AICP
Director of Planning & Zoning

The Planning Commission is appointed as an advisory group to the Board of Supervisors and the Zoning Hearing Board with respect to comprehensive land use planning, existing land use, and various land use and zoning applications in Whitmarsh Township. No formal decisions are rendered by the Planning Commission. Formal decisions are rendered by the Board of Supervisors or Zoning Hearing Board, as prescribed by law, based on the type of application.