

Impressions from the Meeting with Cliff Terrace Residents
on Friday, Feb 20, 6:30-8:00 pm.
By Allan Lundy

First, a minor correction to Olga's report on the main meeting on Friday night. She reported a head count of 63 persons, from Emily and me. However, this was taken near the end of the meeting, and a number of people had already left. There were at least 70 persons and perhaps more who attended for at least an hour.

These are my impressions of the meeting with Cliff Terrace residents. Others' opinions might be somewhat different, but probably not very different. This will also be a bit redundant with what I stated at the main meeting.

There were a full dozen Septa representatives for around 20 residents. I believe that all but two households on the block were represented, but in one case, the owner no longer is a full-time resident.

Representatives included Dave Koerner, of Septa's Engineering, Maintenance, and Construction, who I believe has been in charge of this project and communicates with the Township. I believe he was a mid-level manager. However, there were two bosses above him there, Frances Jones and Francis E. Kelly. There were several other presenters on architecture, traffic, environment, and temporary parking. This time, they all did get the "low-profile" message. The presenters were attentive, obliging, and careful. Emily McHugh read from her notes of the Jenkintown meeting (which included the same Septa representatives), regarding the planning being 30% completed and that Cheltenham had no objection to the building height and loss of the E. H. Parry Bird Sanctuary, and presenters politely denied saying such things. (BTW, they now say that the park they intend to pave over for temporary parking is not really part of the sanctuary, although my 2 foot x 3 foot official map of the Township clearly shows the sanctuary starting at the Post Office driveway.)

Things got rather loud and unruly. Despite numerous pleas to hold questions and comments to the end, all presentations were interrupted many times by shouts from the (tiny) audience.

At the question period, I asked the first one of Mr. Koerner: "What is your impression so far of whether Cheltenham residents are in favor of or opposed to the garage?" He took the question seriously and didn't fall into my cleverly laid trap. His response: "So far, most opinions have been negative."

Many of our main objections were raised. They were met for the most part with respectful silence.

On the issue of past maintenance at other garages, Mr. K did stumble. His polite response, "we can't really address that." This elicited a great deal of shouting to the

effect that it is precisely what they have to address if they expect this proposal to be taken seriously.

I personally have become convinced that their traffic estimates and plans may not be a good point of attack. As I stated later, their traffic experts are pros, well paid, and seem to know what they're doing. Interestingly, one key fact seems not to have come up. Namely, what is the present volume of traffic around and through the Greenwood/Glenside intersection? If we can figure that 250 of the new cars will be arriving and departing during rush hour each morning and evening (the rest earlier or later), then it makes a huge difference what the present volume is. If the new traffic represents a 10% increase, then this would have a significant impact, increasing accidents and congestion on some streets by more than 10%, since the likelihood of collisions and crowding goes up faster than the number of vehicles. However, if this would be only, say, a 2% increase, it truly will not be noticeable. I am concerned that if we place too much importance on this issue, we may not have a rational basis for argument.

Also, note that the traffic will presumably improve after the new bridge is built as currently designed, even if the Septa garage goes nowhere. I expect that PennDOT would keep pretty much the same bridge and traffic patterns—they are not likely to change their plans much due to a (possibly temporary) setback to Septa's plans. This should be asked on the 24th.

One new bit of information: the plans apparently describe a 4 2/3- floor garage. The 5th floor is to be 2/3 the full size, set back against the tracks so as to be blocked by the 4th floor and invisible from Glenside (though presumably not from our homes' 2nd stories). The 5- floor section is the larger rectangle in the overhead views where it says "Parking Garage." The 4-floor section is the rectangle below it. Therefore, many of the views do not include the full height.

One important point that I am only now noticing is that none of the info we have been given so far includes a scale or any mention of dimensions. (I just paced off the present lot. The distance shown on the overhead view straight across from Cliff Terrace from the creek to the "Inbound platform" is 311 feet.) It is hard to estimate from their drawings, but it appears that the garage will take up approximately 2/3 of the present parking lot (not including the unused brushy areas, such as along Greenwood). In terms of height, it looks like the top floor will be well above the height of the bridge. See their "View from Jenkintown looking West" (an error—this is actually the west side of the building, looking south-west). The foreground of the view is an actual photo showing the stone pillar at the end of the stone wall along Greenwood Avenue at the north end of the bridge. The stone wall dipping down to the left is where the Pitcairn property meets the railroad cut. In other words, the top parking level will be about 30 feet or more above the height of the bridge. People walking over the bridge will have to look way up into the sky to see its top. Another way to guesstimate the height is that it appears to be about 2/3 the height of the goal-post-shaped supports for the power cables. My estimate is that the structure will be about 60 feet tall. As another comparison, this is **MORE THAN TWICE THE HEIGHT** of the 3-story houses on Cliff Terrace.

I invite everyone to walk around the present parking lot imagining a building taking up 2/3 of the area, and about 30 feet higher (apparently) than the current bridge.

The real misrepresentation in the views, however, is the east-west length (along Glenside Ave). Compare the overhead plan to the “View from Jenkintown looking West.” That shows the SHORT west side of the building, which I estimate at 192 feet. The east-west length is about TWICE as long (my estimate: 360 feet). Or look at the rendering labeled “View from Cheltenham.” Note that the tower section shown is only about 1/15 of the total length of the building. In other words, this entire view, including the section hidden by trees to the right, shows less than 1/3 of the true length. Scale up that view 3x to the right for a more honest picture. My estimate of the footprint: 7,680 square yards, or about 1½ times the size of a football field, including end zones.

The big show-stopper was a couple of new slides added to the ones we obtained from Jenkintown. These were artist’s renderings of the winter and summer views from about half-way up Cliff Terrace. These were shocking, to put it mildly. During the summer, in theory, much of the lower structure is supposed to be hidden by trees that looked about 30 feet tall. There was no response to my question as to how many years it would take for them to reach that height. But the winter view was absolutely breathtaking. The building is MUCH MUCH UGLIER and MUCH MUCH HIGHER than the other renderings have led us to believe. The building will literally blot out the sky in that direction. The semi-decorative corner towers, for better or worse, will be completely invisible, out of view to the left and right. The only visible feature will be flat rows of concrete-looking floors alternated with open spaces showing tops of vans and taller cars.

One resident asked what monetary compensation Cliff Terrace residents could expect for the decline in property values that will occur. Needless to say, this did not get a response, although it did spark discussion of lawsuits among the attendees. (Incidentally, I was previously not really concerned about this possibility, figuring that it would not be much worse than the present ugly and run-down open lot. Now I am EXTREMELY concerned. It is crystal-clear that home values will go down A LOT on Cliff Terrace, and to some degree for a half-mile around. This thing is an inner-city slum eyesore.)

Francis Jones, a real martinet, was clearly in charge. She loudly interrupted both her own speakers and residents. Contrary to my opinion at the Sunday the 15th meeting, I no longer believe that the meeting on the 24th will go on as long as people have something to say. She barked orders to the effect that our meeting would end on the dot of 8:00. Therefore, people who plan to comment at the 24th meeting MUST keep their statements short and to the point, or ONLY A SMALL FRACTION OF US will be able to speak. I strongly suggest that to save time and add strength, every statement with which we agree be met with a loud roar of approval. (No boos or shouts at comments we don’t like from our neighbors, of course.)

After the meeting, I asked Ms. Jones if many such meetings with residents were as heated as ours. Her response was, and I quote, the flat statement that “This was not heated.” In

other words, many other communities have spoken a lot more loudly and negatively than ours, so they are not impressed. She also stated that they have a lot more trouble from neighborhoods much more affluent than ours. Translation: People who are not used to being cowed.

The more Septa tells us about this project, the more I am becoming convinced that it would be a disaster for Wyncote and a blight on all of Cheltenham.

COME TO THE MEETING ON THE 24th AND URGE YOUR COMMISSIONERS TO BE THERE ALSO.