

Supervisors consider using grant for sidewalk from mall to station

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The casino grant does not cover \$22,500 needed to engineer the sidewalk.

Another chapter of the sidewalk saga should unfold at the next Middletown supervisors meeting.

Board members have debated at the last several meetings on whether to move forward with a plan to use a \$205,000 Parx Casino grant to finish a sidewalk on Woodbourne Road from the SEPTA train station to the Oxford Valley Mall. The grant program is administered by the Redevelopment Authority of the County of Bucks.

Using grant money for the sidewalk was approved by a previous board before new supervisors Patrick Mallon, Tom Gallagher and Drew Kreiling joined the board in January. The supervisors hope to come to a final decision on whether to build the sidewalk on June 7.

One of the sticking points is that the \$22,500 it will take to engineer the sidewalk won't be covered under the grant, which would cover only construction costs, said township solicitor Joseph Pizzo.

"That's \$22,500 in unbudgeted money in a year when the budget is awfully tight," Gallagher said at Monday's meeting.

About 1,600 feet of the sidewalk is already there, and the project would add another 1,600 feet to complete the route from the mall to the train station. Proponents of the project say it would be a great thing for employees or patrons of the mall who arrive at the train station and want to walk the remaining distance to the mall, and then return when their time at the mall is over.

Completing the sidewalk would increase safety, encourage exercise and keep some vehicles off busy Woodbourne Road, the proponents say.

People are walking from the train station to the mall now, and a completed sidewalk would make that exercise much safer, said former supervisor Kathy Heuer, who voted last year to apply the grant money to the sidewalk project.

"I'm eager to see this done so that somebody does not get killed," she said at Monday's meeting.

However, township resident and former Bucks County Commissioner Andy Warren has spoken at several meetings against completing the sidewalk. He said it would actually lead to an unsafe situation, and has questioned how a sidewalk could be squeezed into the area where Woodbourne Road passes under the Route 1 Superhighway near the train station.

"Just because you're getting money for this project doesn't make it a good one," Warren said.

A better use for the grant money would be fixing up portions of Big Oak Road that run through Middletown, he suggested.

Last year, former township engineer Herb Gery of Remington, Vernick and Beach said he thought completing the sidewalk — including the part under Route 1 — would be feasible and issued a brief feasibility report on the matter. The new board replaced Gery with Patrick Duffy of Tri-State Engineers in January.

The casino grants for this year are supposed to be spent on projects that will be substantially completed by the end of the year. However, Pizzo said redevelopment authority officials have told him they would consider an extension if Middletown officials decide they want to spend the grant money on something other than the sidewalk.

At Mallon's request, township Manager Raymond Stepnoski will provide a copy of the sidewalk feasibility report to all board members.

"I would like to know if this project is feasible before I spend any money," said Mallon. "It's fish or cut bait time. We need to either do this sidewalk or move on to something else."

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