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Columbia proposes home-repair help

By TOM KNAPP, Staff

Columbia Borough wants to encourage homeowners and landlords in the borough to make improvements at home.

Council on Monday authorized solicitor Barry N. Handwerger to draft an ordinance establishing tax assistance for residential development.

The ordinance, said councilwoman Sandy Duncan, will be modeled after LERTA (Local Economic Revitalization Assistance Act), which provides 100-percent tax abatement for five years for improvements made to commercial and industrial properties, under certain conditions.

LERTA, approved in Columbia in 2004 according to state guidelines, does not provide incentives to residential properties.

The proposed ordinance, borough manager Norman Meiskey said Monday, would provide "incentives for residential development downtown in blighted areas."

For purposes of LERTA, he said, the entire borough was designated as "blighted" in commercial and industrial districts. A similar measure could be in order for Columbia's residential neighborhoods.

The program is consistent with at least two pieces of state legislation governing tax relief that have been researched by the solicitor, Meiskey added. Lancaster, York and some large boroughs have already drafted similar ordinances, he said.

"In order to make it meaningful, all three entities — the borough, school district and county — will hopefully participate in the tax abatement process," Meiskey said.

Also Monday, Duncan asked Handwerger to investigate and draft an ordinance amendment prohibiting trucks on local streets.

"The truck route signs that need to be followed — and aren't being followed — are hard to enforce," Duncan said.

"The locations of a lot of those signs are not noted in the ordinance, so they can't really be enforced."

Council wants trucks to follow state roads through the borough, rather than coming through the narrower borough streets, she said.

Meiskey said some truck drivers have figured out shortcuts through the borough that take them off the designated truck routes.

"We need to protect the borough streets, and obviously we need to protect the residents of the borough from heavy trucks," he said.

"It's a problem. We're getting complaints, and we want to be sure the

ordinance addressing the problem is enforceable."

In other business Monday, council:

- Terminated discussions with the Columbia Downtown Development Corp. regarding properties at 21-25, 27 and 29 S. Third St.

Council had slated the properties for use in training exercises by Susquehanna Fire Company, after which the sites would be cleared for use as a parking lot. However, those plans were put on hold after CDDC proposed partial demolition, construction and rehabilitation of the properties.

CDDC did not come forward with a solid proposal within the specified timeline, even after council granted the agency a 60-day extension, councilwoman Mary Wickenheiser said Monday. Council will proceed with its previous plan.

- Appointed Wickenheiser as representative to the Strategic Plan Development Group and Duncan as her alternate.
 - Authorized publishing in the newspaper names of property owners who have not made payments to the borough for the Route 462 curb and sidewalk project.
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Columbia loses income from tax-base stimulus programs

By LISA GRIMAUD, Correspondent

Two programs meant to improve the economy in Columbia Borough have backfired, leading to a nearly \$1 million decrease in the borough's tax base, officials said.

For several years, the borough participated in the Keystone Opportunity Zones program and a Local Economic Revitalization Tax Assistance program.

Both programs are designed to encourage new development within a community or improvements to existing properties. They forgive associated real estate taxes for a specified time period or phase in the tax increase over several years.

The borough has specific areas designated as KOZ or LERTA zones.

At the Nov. 20 school board meeting, finance chair Kathy Hohenadel presented the board with 11 pages of tax assessment changes.

The changes reflected several properties in the KOZ or LERTA zones which were reassessed in the past year. As a result of the reassessment, the value of the properties dropped by nearly \$1 million.

"Our borough and school district are so small, this is a big hit for us," Hohenadel said after the meeting. "It is very disappointing when two governing bodies work together on programs to improve the town, only to have them backfire."

The existing LERTA targets commercial properties. During the past year, the school district has been working with the borough to draft a separate residential LERTA program.

The two groups, with their solicitors, have worked together to prepare a resolution. The original deadline for approving the resolution was Nov. 30.

In order to allow more time to review the document and to explore other options, the board voted to extend the deadline through June 30, 2009.

The groups are not committed to accepting the resolution, board president Tom Strickler said.

Hohenadel encouraged the extension, saying it is never wise to make a quick decision. "The ultimate goal is to build our tax base," she said.

In recent months, board members sought new sources of revenue.

One change they made in May was to raise fees charged for use of district facilities. The dramatic increases brought Columbia's fees in line with those of neighboring districts, Strickler said in May.

In November, the board met its first challenge with the increase.

Our Lady of the Angels Catholic School has used the high school gym for basketball games and practices for more than 30 years. Fees have always been waived for the group.

This year, there was some question as to whether the district should continue to waive the fees, which now amount to \$690 per use.

Board member Dave Cunningham raised the issue at the Nov. 13 committee meeting.

"The community has challenged us to think outside the box" to raise revenues, he said.

The board is at odds with that challenge by waiving fees.

The board voted to waive fees for Our Lady of the Angels by an 8 to 1 vote, with Cunningham voting against.

Cunningham said if fees are waived for Our Lady of the Angels, other organizations will request the same treatment.

Rich Hinnencamp, Our Lady of the Angels basketball coach, told the board Nov. 20 the nonprofit school provides programs for many children from low-income families. Up to 90 percent of the children on the basketball team are from Columbia, he said.

He thanked the district for the past use of the school gym and said, "There is no way we can afford the fees."