

Plans vs Projects

By Robert Kettell

There is an old saying that “actions speak louder than words.” If that is true, the City Planning Commission is shouting “We will never change.”

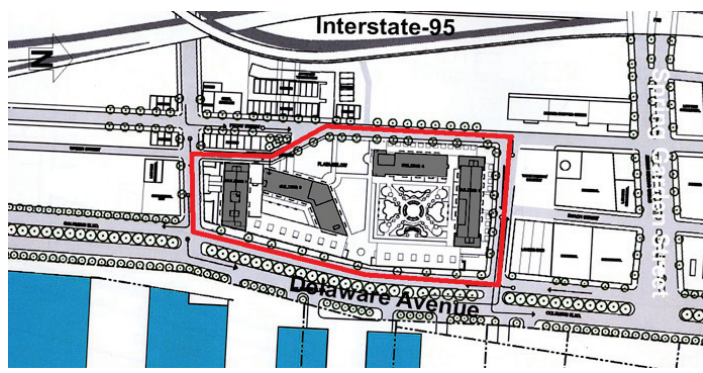
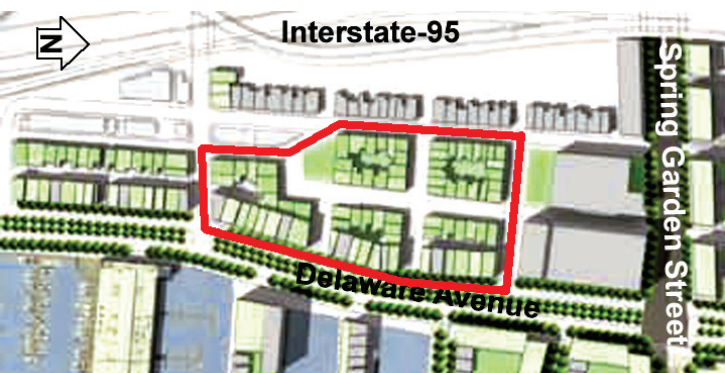


When Michael Nutter was running for mayor he strongly criticized past city administrations for not planning the city's development. He said: “*The City became a place where any type of development, planned or not, was considered better than none.*” He promised to change this: “Rather than react to development proposals as they are made, it would be far better to involve the public in creating local plans that stake out community goals. The guidance provided by these plans and their design guidelines should drive the form and intensity of development. Such enforceable, community-sponsored guidelines create standard expectations that developers must meet rather than treating all projects as negotiable.”

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The Mayor got half-way there. Plans that create development standards have recently been adopted by the City Planning Commission: a new city-wide comprehensive plan became effective on June 7, 2011; a plan for the Central Delaware Waterfront became effective on March 6, 2012; and a new zoning code became effective August 22, 2012.

However the City Planning Commission never got the word that developers must meet these standards. The Commission continues their long-standing tradition of negotiating all projects, and they still feel that any development is better than none. Inga Saffron's September 19th article in the Philadelphia *Inquirer*, titled "3 Apartment Buildings OKd," details three recent examples of the Commission's "we will never change" attitude.

The biggest challenge to changing the Commission's attitude of "development at any price" is yet to come. The plan for the Central Delaware Waterfront details how the area south of Spring Garden Street between I-95 and Delaware Avenue is to be developed:

"The master plan proposes that the intimately scaled and irregular street system, including the uniquely shaped and historic Canal Street, be extended to the south, creating small blocks for conventional residential development, small parks, and recreational facilities, including some of the land under I-95. The environment in [this] area will mirror historic Philadelphia in scale and intent."

Soon the Commission will hear a proposal for this area called Renaissance Plaza. The developer is suggesting one super-block of four towers that are 25, 26, 39, and 40 floors high and which contain over two million square feet -- a long way from a conventional Philadelphia neighborhood or historic scale.

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This proposal certainly does not meet the waterfront plan's standard of continuing existing neighborhoods to the river, in this case the Rivers Edge community that consists of two-, three- and four-story rowhouses. While the Commission has failed in its first three opportunities to implement their own plans, this proposal is so far out of line that their entire planning process would look like a joke if they let it pass.

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