

Regional master plan study is postponed by lack of state funding

By ERIN YOUNGMAN
Post Staff

BACK MOUNTAIN — Because of restricted state grants, a regional master plan proposed by the Back Mountain Council of Governments (COG) has been postponed.

Two weeks ago, COG members decided to split the plan in half and begin the first half immediately.

But the entire plan is now on hold until the COG finds out whether it will be awarded a \$50,000 Land Use Planning and Technical Assistance Program grant (LUTAP).

The decision was made to

prevent harming the group's chances to obtain the grant needed to complete the project, said Joe Moskovitz, Dallas Borough Manager and coordinator of the COG.

The regional plan is being undertaken by Dallas Borough and Dallas, Kingston and Lehman townships to assess several pressing regional issues, traffic, water supply and land use.

Moskovitz said Cindy Campbell, of the Department of Community and Economic Development (DCED), the granting body, explained last week that before awarding any grant money, her department would want

to see three things. First, that the four participating municipalities, are financially committed. Second, that they have matching funds available (not spent), and third, that the group apply for the grant with an entire regional plan, not half of one.

The plan to cut the regional assessment in half and conduct the first half immediately, was made assuming that the group could go ahead using the municipalities' already committed monies and then complete the second half when, and if they received the grant.

Campbell explained DCED's requirement, "We want to see

an application that would result in one comprehensive plan, not two separate pieces."

The group would have also harmed its chances of receiving the grant award if a portion of the matching money was spent, regardless of whether the money had been used for the project.

"We can spend all the money we want," said Moskovitz, "(However) funds expended by the municipalities prior to grant approval will not be counted toward our matching portion."

Once the COG receives notice that it has been awarded the grant money, it can begin to

spend the committed portion without endangering the grant.

One of DCED's requirement is that each municipality show it is financially committed. Three out of the four have indicated they will be able to commit, but Kingston Township has yet to approve a 2004 budget.

The municipalities must pass legislation committing the money. Copies of that legislation then must be sent to DCED, where it will be attached to the group's application.

The cost to each municipality to be a part of the regional plan is based on its population.

Kingston and Dallas townships are the largest and so bear most of the expense. Dallas Township will commit approximately \$16,000 and Kingston Township approximately \$15,000, said Moskovitz. Lehman will pay approximately \$6,000 and Dallas Borough, 5,000.

Frank Wagner, President of the COG, said he is disappointed about putting the plan off, but is optimistic about the prospect of Franklin and Jackson townships joining near the first of the year.

Franklin and Jackson townships have indicated in the past that they want to join, but to date haven't formally done so.

Supervisors okay study over crowd's objections

By RONALD BARTIZEK
Post Staff

KINGSTON TWP. — Going against the overwhelming sentiment of the audience, the township supervisors voted 3-2 Wednesday to commit \$17,000 of the 2004 budget for participation in a regional master plan study commissioned by the Back Mountain Area Council of Governments (COG).

But later in the evening, the entire budget was rejected. It will be taken up again at a special meeting that township Manager Eddie O'Neill anticipated would take place sometime around Thanksgiving.

The funds would be combined with contributions from other COG member municipalities, and would pay half the cost of the study. The firm of Kise, Straw and Kolodner has been selected to conduct the

study, but no contract has been signed.

Frank Wagner, Chairman of the COG, and Joe Moskovitz, the Dallas Borough Manager who has spearheaded the effort for a master plan, both addressed the supervisors before the vote.

"No plan of this nature has ever been conducted in the Back Mountain," Moskovitz said. He suggested Kingston Township stands to suffer the most disruption from increasing traffic, which will be studied in the plan along with water supplies and emergency services.

He advised the supervisors that even though the commitment is made now, money won't be spent until at least a year from now, since the state has advised him that no grants will be considered until October, 2004.

Other members of the COG — Dallas Borough, Dallas Township and Lehman Township — have committed to the study, Moskovitz said. Jackson and Franklin townships are expected to join the group soon, and their addition to the study could reduce the cost to each municipality, said Eddie O'Neill, Kingston Township Manager.

"You will realize economies of scale," he said.

Jeffrey Box, who will take a seat on the board in January, said he supports the COG, but not the study. He suggested that other funding sources be explored, such as those available through a regional transportation planning group that pays 80 percent of the cost.

Box also feels the traffic study portion of a regional plan could easily be ignored by PennDOT, and would therefore be

costly but useless.

Several township residents asked the supervisors to reject the \$17,000 item, due to the weakness of the 2004 budget.

"My hand was raised high on Monday night" in opposition to the item, said Ed Price. At Monday's work session, Paul Sabol, Chairman of the supervisors, asked for a show of hands for or against. In a packed meeting room, fewer than five people indicated support for the plan.

When a vote was taken, Sabol and Chris Yankovich were opposed, while Neil Allen, Carl Goodwin and John Versari made up the majority in favor. At that point, a comment from the audience summed up most people's feelings: "No wonder you guys lost."

Allen and Versari were defeated in the November 4 election.

Budget

(continued from page 1)

The biggest hangup Wednesday night was a desire to investigate whether the township could escape a commitment to pave Green Road. The township sold bonds last year to fund the \$385,000 project, and a construction contract has been signed. Work was to begin just after Thanksgiving.

At first, it appeared there was no way out of the obligation to use the money only for Green Road. "The money has already been received," said township Manager Eddie O'Neill. "At this point it's irrevocable."

A long discussion ensued after Marlyne Lipfert pursued the issue.

"What would it cost to break that contract?" she asked. Solicitor Ben Jones said he had not seen the contract, and could

not answer, but that if the bond documents specified a particular project, they could be used only for that purpose.

Several supervisors then said they believed the bond issue listed Green Road "and other capital projects," perhaps providing an opportunity to redirect the funds to more pressing needs, such as reconstruction of the Center Street bridge.

"Perhaps the contract should be reviewed," Jones said.

After rejecting the first reading of the budget, the supervisors unanimously agreed to ask Jones and the counsel for the bond issuer to review the transaction and offer a recommendation.

Wednesday's meeting was peppered with colorful comments, often exchanged between Chairman Paul Sabol and members of the audience, which have marked each of the last few sessions. There was ev-

ident ill will between Sabol and newly-elected supervisor Jeffrey Box, with Sabol at one point asking Box to sit down with the comment, "You're interfering."

Later in the meeting, Box began a turn at the microphone by saying sternly to Sabol, "Don't ever tell me what to do again."

The preliminary budget has evolved from one that stripped out the entire recreation budget, spring cleanup and held the probability of layoffs to one that has restored the two programs and funds all personnel. But it also uses more than \$300,000 in township savings to operate through the year.

Allen, who was defeated in the November 4 election, addressed that aspect of the budget. "It simply drains the treasury and puts us in a precarious financial condition," he said before voting against the meas-

ure.

After another long discussion earlier in the meeting, the supervisors decided to table plans to accept a revised plan for the Cheltenham subdivision off Pioneer Avenue that included creation of an emergency access road. There is presently only one way in and out of the development.

The developer had offered use of a 30-foot right-of-way to Lincoln Street with the expectation that the township would prepare a roadway and erect a locked fence to prevent through traffic.

But the supervisors felt the plan, approved by the planning commission, required the developer to build a gravel road and the fence, at which point the township would assume maintenance of an easement.

The issue will be revisited at the December 10 meeting of supervisors.



FOR THE POST/FRED ADAMS

Patrick Raymond Russin is led to court Thursday afternoon to plead guilty to third-degree murder.

Russin agrees to testify

By DAVID WEISS
For The Post

WILKES-BARRE — Prosecutors say they secured eyewitness testimony in their homicide case against Hugo Selenski by allowing another man charged to plead guilty to lesser murder charges.

Patrick Raymond Russin, who was charged with homicide in the deaths of two men police have described as drug dealers, pleaded guilty November 6 to two counts of third-degree murder, robbery, abuse of a corpse and a single count of criminal conspiracy to commit robbery.

The plea calls for Russin, 33, of Dallas, to serve no more than 20 to 40 years in prison on all of the charges.

Russin could have faced a much stiffer sentence, including life in prison or the death penalty, if he had taken the homicide charges to trial and been convicted of second- or first-degree murder.

Police charged Selenski, 30, of Kingston Township, and Russin in October with the deaths of Frank Jermaine James and Adieye Keiler, who

authorities have described as "Bloods" gang members.

The two were shot by Selenski in May while he and Russin robbed them of \$40 to \$65 and crack cocaine at Selenski's Mount Olivet Road home, police said. The bodies were later covered with gasoline, tires and wood, and burned for days in Selenski's back yard. Police said details of the killing were outlined by Russin.

After accepting the plea, Luzerne County Court of Common Pleas Judge Michael Conahan scheduled Russin's sentencing tentatively for Jan. 9. Russin was taken back to the Pike County prison.

The remains of the two bodies were found at the home. A total of five bodies were found at Selenski's home after police began a search of the property June 5. No charges have been filed in connection with the other remains.

District Attorney David Lupas said prosecutors deemed Russin's plea to third-degree murder as "appropriate."

Obtaining Russin's testimony was a crucial part of the deal, Lupas said.

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The Post (ISSN - 1090 - 1094)

Published weekly by Cypress Media, LLC. \$20 per year, in Luzerne and Wyoming counties (PA); \$24 elsewhere in PA and additional offices. Periodicals postage paid at Dallas, PA 18612-9998

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to The Post, 15 N. Main St., Wilkes-Barre PA 18711

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