

## Morristown council introduces revised Speedwell plan

Posted by [Kevin Coughlin](#) on August 18, 2011 · [1 Comment](#)

The vote was unanimous, but there were some bumps getting there.

Morristown's council introduced a revised ordinance Thursday for the redevelopment of Speedwell Avenue that would impose four-story height restrictions on much of the project and require the developer to preserve more aesthetic elements of the neighborhood.

The bumpy part was scheduling the next meeting—a public hearing where the council will vote to make the ordinance permanent.

Councilwoman **Raline Smith-Reid** asked to push that date into October, to give her more time to digest the proposed changes and confer with her constituents in the Second Ward. She said the council has “made some mistakes in the past” regarding Speedwell and she was wary of having information “pushed down people’s throats.”



Morristown council candidate Ed Ramirez raises concerns about Speedwell plan. Photo by Kevin Coughlin

Councilwoman **Rebecca Feldman** bristled at that remark and defended the revised redevelopment plan as easily comprehensible. She said the council has had ample time to quiz town planners and study the document; **Alison Deeb**, the council's lone Republican, agreed, noting a memorandum outlining the changes only runs four pages.

The council voted 6-0 to introduce the redevelopment ordinance and set Sept. 15 as the hearing date. Council President **Anthony Cattano Jr.** voted by phone; Councilman **James Smith** was absent and did not vote.

In the meantime, the planning board will review the ordinance to ensure that it complies with the town's 2008 zoning master plan.

### **'THEY WORK IN YOUR RESTAURANTS'**

Affordable housing remains controversial. The revised plan calls for 10 percent of 268 apartment units in Phase One to be set aside as affordable. A 2007 agreement required 20 percent.

**Damika Webb** of the Fair Share Housing Center of Cherry Hill urged the town to stick with 20 percent. **Jodi Miciak** of United Way said many Morristown residents are struggling and need affordable housing.

"These folks work in your restaurants, the Rite Aid, Century 21," Jodi said. "They're hard-working people, with two or three jobs. They need housing that meets their income level."



A large crowd filled the seniors center in town hall for Morristown council vote on Speedwell Avenue redevelopment plan. Photo by Kevin Coughlin

Demolition of seven homes on Early Street for the redevelopment will uproot 15 families, said **Bill Tyler**, a resident of Harding Terrace. Knocking down 15 essentially affordable units in order to erect 26 units of affordable housing (within a proposed 268-unit apartment complex) does not make much sense, he said.

"Morristown is a diverse community. Let's keep it that way," Bill said.

At a minimum, the town should require 12.5 percent, as outlined in another ordinance, said **Ed Ramirez**, a Republican council candidate. He also questioned a "really weird" contractual

agreement that he said would enable the developer to walk away from the project. And he insisted the town should tackle the realignment of Spring Street, Speedwell Avenue and Early Street to alleviate traffic congestion. The town has shelved that project pending further traffic studies.



The Rev. Sidney Williams of Bethel AME Church and Sidney Silverstein, a landlord on Speedwell Avenue, at Morristown redevelopment meeting. Photo by Kevin Coughlin

Although he would benefit from the redevelopment, Speedwell landlord **Jerry Silverstein** (owner of the Minute Man Press building) expressed concerns about gentrification of the predominantly Hispanic neighborhood.

“I feel Latinos deserve the same opportunities as the Italians and Jews to be in a part of Morristown that is not overpriced,” he said.

The town Historic Preservation Commission has been critical of the redevelopment plan, contending it was insensitive to the Speedwell neighborhood’s traditional role as a springboard for immigrants.

Commission member **Marion Harris** like the revised version a little better.

“I think the height limits are an improvement, and I’m glad there is some sense of retaining the rhythmic character of the present streetscape,” Marion said via email. But she thinks the town should hire an historic preservation architect to guide the design. Otherwise, she said, “these vague descriptions are useless...”

She has questions about enforcement.

“Adherence to design guidelines should be mandatory, not optional, and there should be periodic reviews of the actual building process by people who understand what the architectural character of the neighborhood is. To the inexperienced eye, Speedwell looks like a bunch of junk that should be bulldozed, but it’s quite the opposite,” Marion said.

**John and Lori Lotz**, on the other hand, were impatient to get the redevelopment started. They own the vacant Blockbuster Video building on Speedwell and a former Lincoln-Mercury

dealership at the intersection of Spring and Speedwell. A decade of shifting redevelopment plans has made it hard to do anything with their properties, they said.

“This thing has got to get going...we’ve got to kickstart this thing,” John said.



Lori and John Lotz own property along Morristown's Speedwell Avenue. They want redevelopment to get started. Photo by Kevin Coughlin

Mayor **Tim Dougherty** praised the council and the town planners, Jonathan Rose Companies, for working together closely. Many revisions in the redevelopment plan are responses to issues raised by council members, he said.

As for affordable housing, he said the town already has satisfied its legal obligations. Going forward, any new affordable housing will create a surplus, the Mayor said.

“It would be nice if we could get to 20 percent,” he said. “But financially, it’s probably not going to happen.”