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Road work priorities in Bernardsville to await cost study

Feasibility of adding drainage, curbs at issue

By W. JACOB PERRY, Staff Writer Jan 31, 2014

BERNARDSVILLE – A Borough Council decision on whether to prioritize quantity or quality in funding \$10 million in road improvements will await a financial analysis.

At a special council meeting last Thursday night, Jan. 23, officials and an audience of about 20 people debated whether the borough would save money in the long run by spending more per road to ensure durability, or if it should keep repaving a greater number of roads without necessarily getting to the root of drainage and erosion problems.

Mayor Lee Honecker argued that there was no way of knowing without a more thorough financial analysis, and at least one resident agreed.

“Everyone’s willing to believe reconstruction will make the roads last longer,” said Robert Graham of Dryden Road. “That’s not really the issue.”

Graham, who serves as chairman of the borough Planning Board, urged the council to develop a financial “baseline” for the current approach and compare it to a proposal for road upgrades. “If it doesn’t make sense financially, you can’t do it,” he said.

Ultimately, after more than two hours of discussion, Honecker and council members said more information would be compiled on items like tax and debt impacts.

Road maintenance has been an issue in the borough for years. In November 2012, borough voters decisively backed a non-binding referendum to spend up to \$10 million in future years for road improvements. The vote was 1,544 in favor and 997 opposed.

But questions ensued over the best way to spend \$10 million. Councilman Joseph Rossi, chairman of the governing body’s public works committee, has led arguments that troublesome roads should be improved with drainage and curbing to ensure they don’t need to be redone every few years.

Honecker has countered that the cost of such a move would mean most roads in the borough would not get repaved before the \$10 million runs out.

An analysis done by borough staff has shown that for \$21 million over 10 years, 33 miles of Bernardsville's 53 miles of streets could be done with drainage.

Assessing Needs

As last Thursday's meeting, a key issue was what residents thought they would be getting in backing the referendum.

Council members Rossi, Michael dePoortere and Jeff DeLeo – who comprise the public works committee – argued in favor of more extensive road improvements, while Honecker questioned the cost of doing so.

New council members Janet Waite and Christopher Schmidt did not advocate a position; the remaining council member, John Farrell, was absent.

'Lost Ground'

Borough engineering consultant Robert Brightly gave a summary of a borough road study from January 2010, when road repairs were prioritized.

He said that in the last four years, 10 of the town's 40 neediest roads have been addressed, with two more in the works.

Nevertheless, he noted, the amount of road surface in poor shape nearly doubled to 2.3 miles, so "we lost ground."

Moreover, about 20 miles of road surface needs drainage improvements, Brightly said. Other roads could use curbs, he added.

The \$10 million would be spent over 10 years, with appropriations of about \$2 million to be made every two years, Borough Administrator Ralph Maresca told the council. He based the phasing on a state rule that requires 60 percent of all borrowed money to be spent within three years.

In a typical year, the borough has spent about \$650,000 on roads while also receiving a \$150,000 grant award from the state, Maresca said.

The public works committee, in conjunction with the engineering study, proposed \$2.14 million in roadwork for the next two years. The roads and costs included:

- Sycamore Court, \$530,000.
- Post Kennel Road (drainage only), \$500,000.
- Hardscrabble Road from Jockey Hollow Road to Bernards Township, \$360,000.
- Bodnar Street, \$230,000.
- Park Lane, \$230,000.
- Seney Drive (paving only), \$160,000.
- Mine Mount Road, \$130,000.

Honecker was critical of the proposal, saying the borough would be spending \$2.14 million to address only 2.5 miles of roads. He said he believed the desire of voters in backing the referendum was “to do as many roads as we can for \$10 million.”

‘Do The Job Right’

Rossi, however, said that by installing any needed curbing or drainage, a road could be addressed for the next 25 to 30 years instead of only five to 10 years.

Councilman dePoortere agreed that the borough’s practice of simply milling and paving troublesome roads is not cost-effective.

“If we continue to do the same thing over and over again, we’re going to throw money away,” he said. “I’ve heard this is the way it’s always been done. It’s not working.”

Honecker observed that Bodnar Street would be improved with sidewalks, drainage and curbing. He questioned whether there had been any complaints.

DeLeo countered that the poor condition of Bodnar Street and Park Lane has affected nearby Claremont Field, which he viewed as “totally underutilized.”

“Right now that park is a disaster,” DeLeo said. “It’s flooded all the time. The whole field should be cleaned up.

“You don’t need someone to complain,” he told the mayor. “You can see it yourself.”

Honecker continued to object. He said the proposed spending package would be “changing the philosophy of the borough.”

“The philosophy was to do the most with the least,” he said. He argued that a change would mean many roads would be not be addressed for 20 years or more.

Rossi, dePoortere and DeLeo all asserted that the proposal was fiscally responsible.

“We’re not putting curbs and sidewalks everywhere,” said dePoortere. “The philosophy is to do the job right.”

Added DeLeo, speaking to Honecker, “You kicked the can down the road ... These roads need to be structurally sound.”

The mayor shot back, “Tell the public you want to spend \$2.1 million for two-and-a-half miles of road.”

Maresca, asked by council members to discuss the tax impact, said one cent in the municipal tax rate equals \$225,000 in spending, so \$1 million per year in road spending would amount to 4.4 cents per \$100 of assessed property value.

The tax impact on a \$1 million home would be \$440 per year; for a \$750,000 home, \$330; and for a \$500,000 home, \$220, Maresca said.

DeLeo, speaking to a reporter after the meeting, said he did not feel those numbers should be reported because there would be a further review.

Residents Weigh In

Eight members of the public addressed the council and voiced a mix of views.

"I want things done right," said Nancy McClure of Bodnar Street. "Everything that needs to be done to make that road (Bodnar Street) last is important. What good does it do if our grandchildren continue to pay for deteriorating roads?"

Edith Cavaluzzo of Garabaldi Street remarked that Park Avenue "looks like a back alley, not a road."

Mary Donlik of Mullens Lane focused more on costs, saying they should be clarified for the public. She also asked if roads that receive drainage improvements would then fall into a less expensive "maintenance mode" category.

As for other improvements, "cool it with sidewalks we don't necessarily need," she told the council.

Peter Miller of Hardscrabble Road echoed Honecker in challenging the proposed costs.

"If I thought we were going to spend \$1 million for only one mile, I never would have voted for this" referendum, he said. If the borough sought to address all roads at that rate, he said, it would be on track to spend \$30 million to \$40 million.

Graham said if money is spent on a limited number of roads, the council should be conscious about public perceptions and the idea of "seeing your tax dollars at work."

He said it was important to "at least make everyone perceive that something's going on."