MEMORANDUM
8/31/18

TO: Westtown Township Planning Commission
    Westtown Township Board of Supervisors
    Robert Pingar, Township Manager
    Will Ethridge, Township Planning Director
    Pat McKenna, Township Solicitor

FROM: John D. Snook, Senior Advisor

RE: Westtown School Requests for Zoning Amendment and Conditional Use Approval for Lighted Athletic Fields

I will attend the meeting of the Planning Commission next week and offer the following comments in advance:

Westtown School has submitted a request to amend the Township Zoning Ordinance to permit lighting of athletic fields at greater levels than otherwise permitted. Westtown School has also submitted an application for Conditional Use approval to permit development of lighted athletic fields in accordance with the proposed Zoning amendment. A Land Development Plan to permit the construction of the lighted athletic fields and ancillary facilities will be considered at a later date.

Earlier in the process of initial exploration of these issues by Westtown School with the Township, I met with Township staff and Tim Barnard, solicitor for Westtown School in this regard. We expressed a willingness to suggest, for your consideration, reasonable accommodation of their desires, while seeking to minimize impact to neighbors and the broader community. We iterated to Mr. Barnard our key concerns:

- Lighting on potentially many nights, impacting neighbors’ enjoyment of their property, sleep, and elimination of “dark sky” that affords view of stars;
- Noise issues;
- Police and emergency services issues;
- Trash collection;
- Parking and traffic issues.
We suggested that an appropriate Zoning amendment to Section 170-1514, D.5 of the Township Code (Zoning) would retain all of the existing requirements for police detail and trash pickup, etc., and agreed for your consideration to add exceptions for properties over 400 acres to allow private organizational use, more than 20 days of lighting per year (although we did not discuss an ultimate number of days), and two rather than one lighted athletic field, all subject to provision of adequate landscape screening. We also agreed to include the suggestion that the Board of Supervisors may waive or reduce the annual permit requirement subject to conditional use approval. Noise and parking and traffic issues are not currently mentioned in Section 170-1514, but are reasonable considerations under current conditional use standards.

Mr. Barnard submitted a proposed amendment that incorporated all of our suggestions but notably added the limitations of 258 nights per year and up to six per week, only excluding Sunday. This number of lighted events had not previously been specifically discussed with me and Township staff. Later he suggested that night lighting would be limited only to practice sessions; however, the application only states “primarily practice.” The Land Development Plan, to be considered later, includes a substantial structure housing concessions, shaded spectator areas, etc. which leads to believe that major events could be permitted day or night. We suggest the following for your consideration:

- Approval of lighted fields be conditioned on ONLY practice sessions under lights – NO competitions or tournaments! and
- The number of days per week and year for lighted events be reduced to a more reasonable number initially, which can be revised after we see how it works out and how neighbors and community services may be impacted in the first year or two of lighted use.

Mr. Barnard submitted with his applications additional information, including testimonials on parking and traffic impacts and lighting impacts. If lighted events are limited to practice sessions, I agree that the parking and traffic conclusions are reasonable. I do not agree about the lighting impacts. I am not a lighting expert, but I am aware that the “full cutoff” fixtures and LED lighting will reduce impacts (you will not be able to see the actual light fixtures from afar). However, the conclusion that there will be no glare or spill-over effect of light is not entirely accurate. Light will reflect off the fields and, in this humid climate, will fill the moisture-laden air with light, resulting in a glow potentially affecting neighbors’ use of their property at night, or their sleep, despite the purported 1,500-feet distance to the nearest residence.

In considering these issues, it is worth noting that the most significant lighting impacts will be in the Fall. In the Spring, Daylight Savings Time starts early and in the Summer, there will be little issue, while in the Winter, where there would otherwise be the biggest impacts, who wants to play soccer or lacrosse outdoors?!