

ZONING HEARING BOARD OF UPPER MERION TOWNSHIP

APPLICATION NO. 2010-02 : HEARING DATE: April 7, 2010
: :
APPLICATION OF: John Middleton : DECISION DATE: May 19, 2010
Company : :
: :
: :
PROPERTY: 418 W. Church Road : :
: :
Upper Merion Township :

**OPINION AND ORDER OF THE UPPER MERION
TOWNSHIP ZONING HEARING BOARD**

The Applicant, John Middleton Company, (hereinafter referred to as the "Applicant"), filed an application requesting the following variances: 1) Section 165-146.A in order to construct a security booth that will encroach into the required front yard setback, 2) Section 165-146.E in order to locate the proposed security booth within the residential district and also to locate an electrical transformer closer than the required 150 ft. to the residential zoning district, and, 3) Section 165-191.B(7) to reduce the number of required parking spaces. The application was properly advertised, and a public hearing was held before the Upper Merion Township Zoning Hearing Board on April 7, 2010 at the Upper Merion Township Building. All members of the Zoning Hearing Board were present as well as the Solicitor, Zoning Officer, and Court Reporter.

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. The Applicant is John Middleton Company, 418 W. Church Road, King of Prussia, PA 19406.

2. The Applicant is the legal owner of the subject property.
3. The property is located at 418 W. Church Road, King of Prussia, PA 19406, Upper Merion Township.
4. The Applicant was represented by Ross Weiss, Esq., Cozen-O'Connor, 200 Four Falls Corporate Center, West Conshohocken, PA 19428.
5. The property is zoned "R-2" Residential and "LI" Light Industrial Zoning District.
6. The lot is approximately 7.45 acres.
7. The Applicant is proposing to modernize a facility that has been in existence since 1960.
8. The Applicant introduced five (5) exhibits as follows:
 - Exhibit "A-1" – Application
 - Exhibit "A-2" – Resume of Robert Walsh, PE, PP
 - Exhibit "A-3" – A Colored Up Aerial
 - Exhibit "A-4" – Plan
 - Exhibit "A-5" – Three (3) Prior Zoning Decisions from 1958, 1964 and 1979
9. The Applicant's use on the subject property is for tobacco processing.
10. The current building coverage is 28%. After the additions, it will increase to 29%.
11. After the project is completed, there will be no change in the traffic pattern.
12. The essential character of the neighborhood will not be impacted by granting the relief.
13. The plan proposes an addition of less than 5,000 sq. ft. of new buildings.
14. The structures that are proposed within the required setback are very small in terms of height and area.

15. The current parking facility is under utilized, therefore, additional spaces are not necessary.
16. The number of employees and the hours of operation will not change.
17. The impervious coverage will not change because the Applicant is removing some impervious coverage.
18. There were no residents who testified in favor of the application.
19. There were no residents who testified against the project.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

The Applicant, John Middleton Company, (hereinafter referred to as the "Applicant"), filed an application requesting the following variances: 1) Section 165-146.A in order to construct a security booth that will encroach into the required front yard setback, 2) Section 165-146.E in order to locate the proposed security booth within the residential district and also to locate an electrical transformer closer than the required 150 ft. to the residential zoning district, and 3) Section 165-191.B(7) to reduce the number of required parking spaces.

As a preliminary matter, the applicable standards for determining whether to grant a dimensional variance differ from those of a use variance. The standard as outlined by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court is that the Applicant must show that unnecessary hardship will result if a variance is denied and that the proposed use will not be contrary to public interest. Hertzberg v. Zoning Bd. of Pittsburgh, 554 Pa. 249, 721 A.2d 43 (1998); citing, Allegheny West Civic Council, Inc. v. Zoning Bd. of Adjustment of the City of Pittsburgh, 547 Pa. 163, 167, 689 A.2d 225, 227 (1997).

In Hertzberg, the Supreme Court held that the Zoning Hearing Board must, at the beginning of its analysis of an appeal from the terms of a Zoning Ordinance, determine whether the requested relief is for a use variance or a dimensional variance. Id. If the Board determines that the relief is for a use variance, then the Board should use the traditional five-part test, which is set forth in both the Municipalities Planning Code and case law. If the requested relief is for a dimensional variance, then the standard to be applied will be different. Id. While the Court in Hertzberg did not specifically identify a single standard for a dimensional variance, it noted that the requirements for a dimensional variance were something less than that of a use variance. Id.

In its opinion, the Court went on to opine that some of the factors that a Zoning Hearing Board should look at to determine whether to grant a dimensional variance should include, where applicable:

- (1) The economic detriment to Applicant if the variance was denied;
- (2) The financial hardship created by any work necessary to bring the building into strict compliance with the zoning requirements; and,
- (3) The characteristics of the surrounding neighborhood. Id.

While these factors are not exhaustive, the Court in Hertzberg and subsequent cases have referred to them specifically as findings a Zoning Hearing Board should make in its determination of whether to grant or deny a dimensional variance.

Although the language of Hertzberg is expansive, the current trend is to apply the relaxed standard for dimensional variances only to the consideration of whether unnecessary hardship results from unique physical characteristics or conditions of the land. The Friendship Preservation Group, Inc. v. Zoning Hearing Board of Adjustment of the City of Pittsburgh, 808

A.2d 327 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2002); Cardamone v. Whitpain Township Zoning Hearing Board, 771 A.2d 103 (Pa. Cmwlth. 2001).

The reasons for granting a variance must be substantial, serious and compelling. POA Company v. Findlay Township Zoning Hearing Board, 551 Pa. 689, 713 A.2d 70 (1998); Evans v. Zoning Hearing Board of the Borough of Spring City, 732 A.2d 686 (Pa. Cmwlth. 1999); Sotereanos, Inc. v. Zoning Board of Adjustment of the City of Pittsburgh, 711 A.2d 549 (Pa. Cmwlth. 1998). Moreover, variances to zoning codes should be granted sparingly and only under exceptional circumstances; a variance should not be granted simply because such a grant would permit the owner to obtain greater profit from or use of the property. Commonwealth v. Zoning Hearing Board of Susquehanna, 677 A.2d 853 (Pa. Cmwlth. 1996).

In order to grant a variance, the Board must make the findings set forth in § 910.2 of the Municipalities Planning Code, 53 P.S. § 10910.2, where relevant. The law established by the Pennsylvania courts further establishes these standards, stated in full herein. See, Alpine Inc. v. Abington Township Zoning Hearing Board, 654 A.2d 186 (Pa. Cmwlth. 1995); Appeal of Lester M. Prang, Inc., 169 Pa. Cmwlth. 626, 647 A.2d 279 (1994). The findings that the Board must make, where relevant, in granting a variance as set forth in the Municipalities Planning Code are as follows:

1. That there are unique physical circumstances or conditions, including irregularity, narrowness, or shallowness of lot size or shape, or exceptional topographical or other physical conditions peculiar to the particular property and that the unnecessary hardship is due to such conditions and not the circumstances or conditions generally created

by the provisions of the zoning ordinance in the neighborhood or district in which the property is located.

2. That because of such physical circumstances or conditions, there is no possibility that the property can be developed in strict conformity with the provisions of the zoning ordinance and that the authorization of a variance is therefore necessary to enable the reasonable use of the property.
3. That such unnecessary hardship has not been created by the Applicant.
4. That the variance, if authorized, will not alter the essential character of the neighborhood or district in which the property is located, nor substantially or permanently impair the appropriate use or development of adjacent property, nor be detrimental to the public welfare.
5. That the variance, if authorized, will represent the minimum variance that will afford relief and will represent the least modification possible of the regulation in issue.

The Applicant has a current facility that has existed since 1960 and the Applicant is proposing to modernize certain features of the existing facility. The proposed construction is less than 5,000 sq. ft. and considering the size of the structures on the subject property, the proposal seems to be *deminimus* in nature. The Applicant will remove impervious coverage to accommodate the proposed project, thereby maintaining the same level of impervious coverage. The Applicant will have the same hours of operation and the same number of employees. The

Applicant's current parking field is under utilized, therefore, the Applicant should not have to comply with the parking requirements under the code. All of the Applicant's variances are *deminimus* in nature and they constitute dimensional variances that fall under the standards of the Hertzberg case. Through the use of testimony and exhibits, the Applicant sufficiently satisfied the standards of the Hertzberg case, therefore, the relief should be granted.

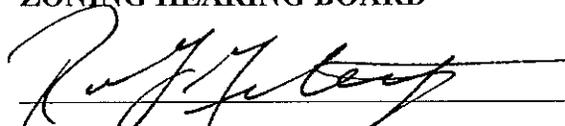
ORDER OF THE UPPER MERION TOWNSHIP

ZONING HEARING BOARD

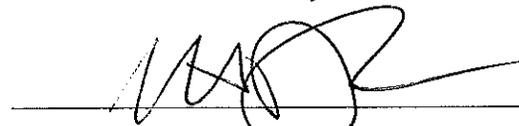
IT IS HEREBY ORDERED AND DECREED that the Board finds that the Applicant presented sufficient testimony to grant the requested variances. These variances are conditioned upon the Applicant's compliance with the testimony of the Applicant at the public hearing on April 7, 2010.

Decision Dated: May 19, 2010

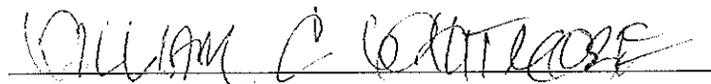
**UPPER MERION TOWNSHIP
ZONING HEARING BOARD**



Robert J. Montemayor - Chairman



Mark S. DePillis, Esq. - Vice Chairman



William C. Whitmore, Sr. - Secretary

NOTE TO APPLICANT:

There is a thirty (30) day period after the date of a decision for an aggrieved person to file an appeal in the Court of Common Pleas of Montgomery County to contest an approval or denial by the Zoning Hearing Board. If the Applicant has been granted Zoning Hearing Board approval, the Applicant may take action on said approval during the thirty (30) day appeal period; however, the Applicant will do so at his or her own risk. If the Applicant has received Zoning Hearing Board approval, the Applicant must secure all applicable permits from Upper Merion Township within one (1) year of the date of the approval or the decision granting approval.