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SCOTT FRANCE, AICP
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

January 23, 2025

Mr. Charles L. Guttenplan, AICP
Director of Planning & Zoning Officer
Whitmarsh Township
616 Germantown Pike
Lafayette Hill, Pennsylvania 19444

Re: MCPC #23-0239-002
Plan Name: 1001 Washington Street
Comprising 3.7 acres (gross) / 46 dwelling units
Situate: Washington Street (south) at Lee Street
Whitemarsh Township

Dear Mr. Guttenplan:

We have reviewed the above-referenced subdivision and land development proposal in accordance with Section 502 of Act 247, "The Pennsylvania Municipalities Planning Code," as you requested on November 18, 2024. We forward this letter as a report of our review.

BACKGROUND

The applicant, Hightop Real Estate & Development has submitted for review a land development plan that proposes the construction of 46 townhouses arranged in 8 buildings on a 3.69-acre site which was the former corporate headquarters of David's Bridal, Inc. The plan proposes the demolition of the former David's Bridal 75,916 sq. ft. office building and the 2-level parking garage and connecting Washington Street to Station Avenue along the development tract's frontage.

The development tract is within the Schuylkill River's 100-year floodplain and a large area is within FEMA's delineated floodway. The property is Tax Parcel # 65-00-05581-01-5, which is situated in the township's HVY- Heavy Industrial District and in the RDD-Riverfront Development Overlay District-(RDD-2 Sub-district) and in the Floodplain Conservation District. The development tract lies immediately east of Riverplace, a new 62-unit townhouse community (901 Washington Street) under construction and approved by the township in March 2021. Immediately east of the tract is the 38-acre Spring Mill County Park, a riparian park bisected by the Schuylkill River Trail. The plan shows the

extension of Washington Street to its intersection with Lee Street that was part of the recently adopted Township Official Map.

The planning commission's most recent review for the development of this tract was in a sketch plan review letter to the township dated January 4, 2024. The proposal included a 5 level, 165-unit apartment building constructed over an existing 2-level parking structure and 50-Up-Down townhouses. We did not support the proposal shown in the sketch plan, citing its adequacy in addressing multiple requirements of the township's Riverfront Development Overlay Zoning District and its inconsistency with both the county's comprehensive land use goals and the goals of the Spring Mill Multi-Modal & Land Use Study.

In their decision on May 15, 2024, the Zoning Hearing Board (ZHB) of Whitemarsh Township granted 2 Special Exceptions and 12 Variances to the applicant, subject to certain conditions. The Decision is subject to several Conditions: #5 states that:

> *"The relief and approvals granted herein are specifically conditioned and contingent upon the Applicant obtaining approval from FEMA of a Letter of Map Revision (LOMAR) such that the floodway line shall be as exactly shown on the Revised Zoning Plan marked as Exhibit A-9. . . If such FEMA approval is not received, the relief and approval granted by this Decision and Order shall be of no force or effect." (FEMA)*

The plan notes indicate that 18 waivers are requested: 12 waivers from Chapter 105, the township's Subdivision and Land Development; 3 waivers from Chapter 58, Grading, Erosion Control and Stormwater Management and 2 waivers from Chapter 55, Tree Protection Standards.

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN COMPLIANCE

Consistency with the *MONTCO 2040* – County Comprehensive Plan-

Montco 2024: A Shared Vision, the county comprehensive plan, supports the redevelopment and reinvestment in areas where infrastructure exists, with a special emphasis on opportunities near transit centers such as the Spring Mill area. However, the redevelopment of the site is entirely within the 100-year floodplain and +/- 20 units of the 46 proposed units are within the delineated floodway of the Schuylkill River. This arrangement is inconsistent with the 'Sustainable Places' land use vision of the Montco 2040: A Shared Vison, the Montgomery County Comprehensive Plan. The vision and plan recommendation is for communities to adopt local floodplain regulations that prohibit fill and new construction within the floodplain, except for sites that are brownfield redevelopments. The county's and the township's regulations were adopted in part to recognize that fill and new construction in the floodplain diminishes the flood storage capacity of the floodplain and that numerous encroachments will have a detrimental cumulative impact.

Consistency with the *Whitemarsh Township Selective Comprehensive Plan Update, 2020,* & *The Spring Mill Multi-Modal and Land Use Study, March 2022.*

The redevelopment proposal for this property appears incompatible with the township's future land use vision for this area which envisions it as a 'Waterfront District Character Area', as recommended by the *Whitemarsh Township Selective Comprehensive Plan Update, 2020*, specifically in Chapter Four-Future Land Use Plan. The future land use goal for this character area is to support high-density development and quality public spaces along the riverfront. The tract is considered a key opportunity for development by the recently completed *Spring Mill Multi-Modal and Land Use Study, March 2022*. The study recommends that underutilized parcels be redeveloped in a manner that leverages the regionally significant assets along the junction of the Schuylkill River Trail, Washington Street redevelopment projects, and the Spring Mill SEPTA transit station.

RECOMMENDATION

The Montgomery County Planning Commission (MCPC) is unable to support the applicant's plan for the redevelopment of the David's Bridal site as submitted. While we support the township's land use vision for a multi-use, residential redevelopment for this site, we believe the applicant's redevelopment plan is inadequate in addressing many of the land use goals of the township and its planning initiatives for the Spring Mill and Schuylkill Riverfront over the past decade.

We acknowledge that the Zoning Hearing Board approvals – contingent upon the LOMAR decision – will permit the proposed residential development within an area with a high probability of more frequent devastating flooding. As discussed, and illustrated in the following comments, we have a heightened concern about the devastating consequences of property losses and potential loss of human life with the ever-increasing Schuylkill River flooding events. We conclude that this will only increase, given the direction of climate change. These and other concerns are discussed below:

REVIEW COMMENTS ITE PLANNING

1. **Development in the Schuylkill River's Floodway and 100-Year Floodplain**

   a. *River Flooding and Public Safety*
   We have serious concerns regarding the redevelopment of the site as proposed in the plan. According to the FEMA mapping shown below, the site has a high risk of flooding — 99% of 3 ft. or greater flooding at this site — with the highest impacted area being near the confluence of the Spring Mill Creek and the Schuylkill River. The potential impacts on the public's health, safety and welfare, and the environmental impacts are very significant factors in assessing the applicant's plan for redevelopment. A chief concern is that this

development will inevitably place additional burdens on many local and county emergency services responding to Schuylkill River flooding events, including rescues at this site and on the neighboring properties.

Given the history of exceptionally damaging flooding in this area, the township should ensure that the flood emergency plan submitted by the applicant meets the challenges posed by potential catastrophic river flooding, such as shown below during the aftermath of Hurricane Ida rains on Sept 1 & 2, 2021. We recommend that professionals with experience in evaluating emergency plans assess the submitted *Emergency Action Plan, May 1, 2024.*

A concern that has arisen often with flood-prone multi-family developments in Conshohocken is having an accessible place to relocate both personal vehicles and pets. This is not identified in the plan and should be, in the event that an evacuation is ordered. The experience of Hurricane Ida, September 2021 and its aftermath was that hundreds of vehicles were a total loss along the riverfront. Therefore, a site for relocation should be identified at this juncture. We recommend the applicant provide the evacuation plan and disclose the risks associated with living at this location and the need for residents to heed and act on all evacuation orders, or risk the potential loss of life and property. In light of the catastrophic damages associated with Hurricane Ida, we believe this disclosure and blunt statement is warranted.

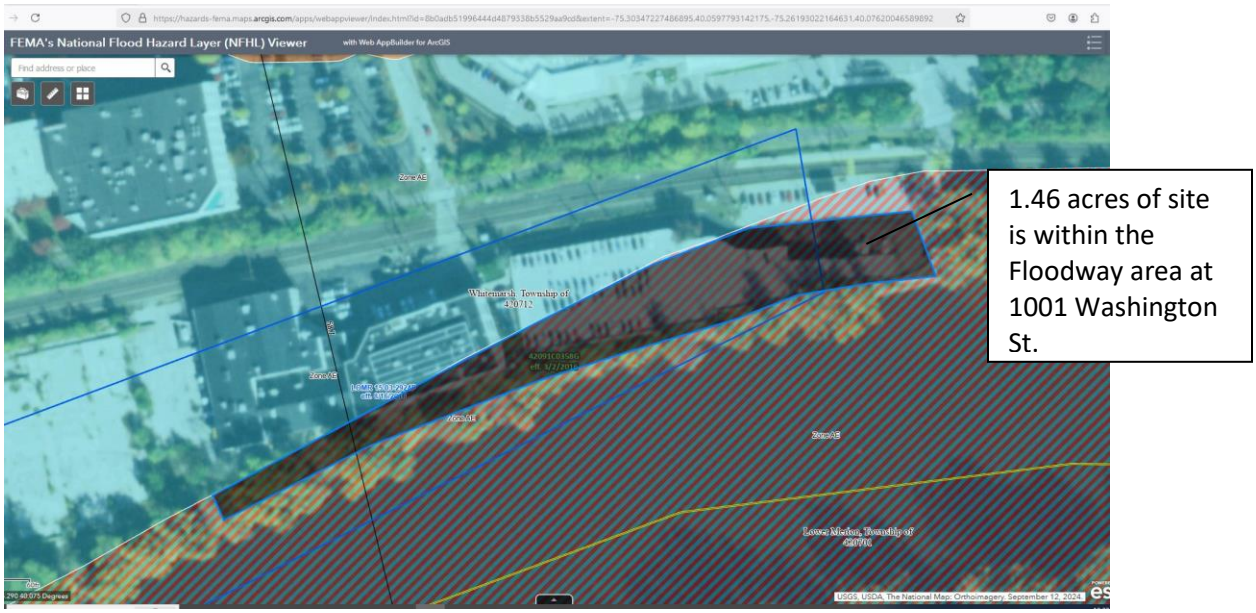


Hurricane Ida, September 1 & 2, 2021 – Flooding at Spring Mill and the applicant's development tract

b. Required DEP- Chapter 105 Encroachment Permit

As shown below, approximately 1.6 acres of the development tract (shaded area) lies within the FEMA-delineated floodway of the Schuylkill River. Section 402 of the The PA model Floodplain Ordinance (*Description and Special Requirements of Identified Floodplain Areas)* states:

1. Within any floodway area, no encroachments, including fill, new construction, substantial improvements, or other development shall be permitted unless it has been demonstrated through hydrologic and hydraulic analysis performed in accordance with standard engineering practice that the proposed encroachment would not result in any increase in flood levels within the community during the occurrence of the base flood discharge.
2. Within any floodway area, no new construction or development shall be allowed, unless the appropriate permit is obtained from the Department of Environmental Protection Regional Office.



1001 Washington St - FEMA Flood Risk map- +/- 64,000 SF (1.46 ac) in the floodway

3. Washington Street & Pedestrian Amenities

a. *Streetscape Improvements & Pedestrian Amenities*

The plan does not address the various amenities and streetscape improvements necessary to ensure a pedestrian-friendly streetscape in the development of Washington Street, as required by Section 116-283.D.-Design Standards. The township's regulations for a pedestrian-oriented development requires various pedestrian-oriented improvements, including pedestrian lighting, benches, riverfront orientation signage and pavement variety. (Section 116-283.D.1.). These improvements are not shown in the submitted plan. The applicant has received a variance for the required planting of street trees and the landscape verge along the street.

Given this relief, the other amenities mentioned above would assist in making Washington Street more pedestrian-friendly, with an arrangement more consistent with other sections of the street, and should be included in the final plan. A recommendation from the ***Spring Mill Multi-Modal and Land Use Study, March 2022*** meriting township consideration for street improvement along the applicant's frontage is the low-mural wall. While a mural wall would require multiple partners for its implementation, it could serve as a significant visual amenity and improvement along the rail corridor.

b. *Safe Pedestrian Connections Are Needed-SEPTA Regional Rail Crossing at Lee Street & Station Avenue*

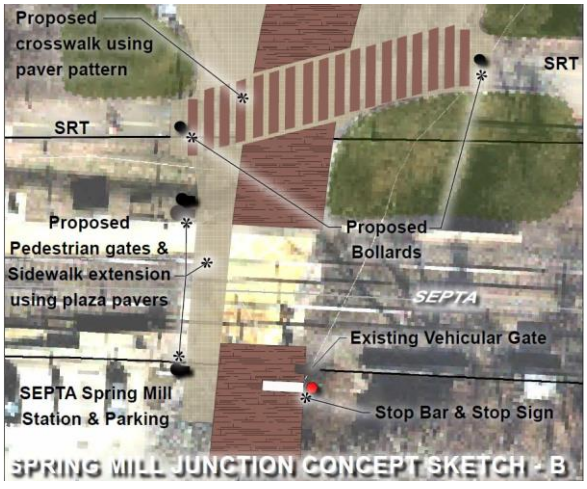
A safe, dedicated pedestrian connection is needed at the SEPTA rail crossing at the intersection of both Lee Street and Washington Street, and at Station Avenue and Washington Street. As shown in the photo below, pedestrians have limited options to safely cross the SEPTA Regional rail tracks and are forced to walk into the roadway at Lee Street. The development plan should include a pedestrian crosswalk, to allow for a safe connection at Washington Street and Lee Street. This is missing from the applicant's site development plan. As the photo below illustrates, the sidewalk connections along Lee Street are missing north of the rail tracks, and pedestrians are forced to walk in the street cartway. We recommend the township examine this missing sidewalk link and seek ways to complete the sidewalk network in this area.

Station Avenue Sidewalk Extension

The *Spring Mill Multi-Modal and Land Use Study (MMLUS) Recommendations* show a concept sketch with a sidewalk extension using pavers across the rail tracks and a pedestrian gate. We recommend the submitted plan be modified to include the paver sidewalk, as recommended in the Spring Mill Study, and a delineated pedestrian crosswalk at Washington Street and Station Avenue. We recommend the applicant and the township partner with SEPTA to make these improvements at these intersections.



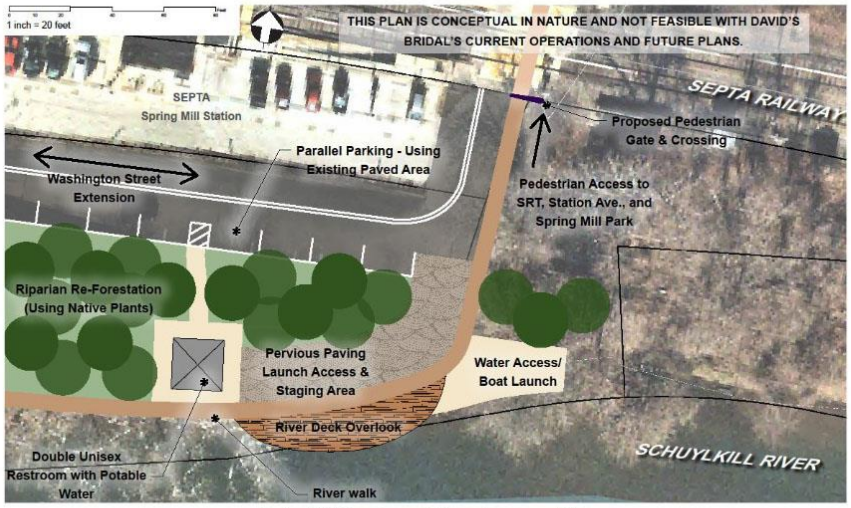
Lee Street- View looking south to Washington



Paver / Sidewalk Extension at Station Ave.

c. *Perpendicular parking at Washington St at the Station Avenue intersection*
The applicant is seeking a waiver of Section105.38.(F) that prohibits perpendicular parking along a public or private street. The applicant's note states that, "perpendicular parking will not pose a safety risk given the low volume of traffic." We believe that traffic volume will increase with the construction of several significant multi-family developments that have been approved west of the applicant's site. We do not support this relief and believe the proposed arrangement raises serious safety issues with the limited sight distance for motorists backing out onto a secondary street. We believe the safety issue is heightened with the proposed parking area located at a juncture of Washington Street, the SEPTA Regional Rail and the Station Avenue. As illustrated below and recommended by the Spring Mill Multi Modal and Land Use Study, parallel parking or back end angle parking should be considered, rather than perpendicular parking.

David's Bridal property, is, unfortunately, not feasible in the immediate future. Providing an informal boat launch, gathering space, and potential reforestation area here would not fit with the existing uses or parking garage ramp.



Spring Mill River Access Point – Conceptual Plan

d. *Pedestrian Amenities*
The applicant has received relief from providing the required street trees and a verge area along Washington Street, which are key ingredients in making a pedestrian and environmentally friendly streetscape. We recommend the township assess other potential amenities identified in the recommendations of the ***Spring Mill Multi-Modal and Land Use Study, March 2022.*** One amenity that should be considered and would assist in making the applicant's site more visually appealing is the low-mural wall.

4. Schuylkill Riverfront Trail

a. *Integrity of the Riverfront Trail*
The applicant and township should discuss how the riverfront trail's resiliency in the face of ever-increasing flood events along the Schuylkill River. The proposed trail is confined in several areas, wedged between the bottom of the proposed retaining wall and the top of a very steep riverbank. This area will be subject to flooding, accumulate river debris and be subject to the erosive power of the river. This may undercut the narrow trail and cause riverbank erosion and loss. The township should consider ways to make this area more resilient and determine where responsibility will lie for river trail cleanup and repairs after flooding events.

b. *Riverfront Trail User Safety*
The plan shows the slopes exceed 25% for most of the Riverfront Trail's length along the river, and there appears to be no safe area to step aside, such as a shoulder area, at the top of the river's embankment. Given that the trail is immediately adjacent to very steep slopes, the applicant should provide guard railing along the length of the trail to prevent users from falling down the steep embankment.

. 4. **Landscape Improvements Plan**

a. Impacts on the Tree Canopy Along the Schuylkill Riverfront
The 2-level parking deck and ramp occupy approximately 455 ft. of frontage adjacent to the Schuylkill Riverbank, and the deck and its ramp will be demolished. Demolition of the parking structure and the proposed construction of the retaining wall for the development will potentially impact the tree roots and long-term health of the riverbank's tree canopy. The applicant's demolition plan does not show any of these trees as existing natural features. We recommend the applicant provide greater detail on the size and location of these riverbank trees, and ensure that mitigation measures are in place to address township's tree-protection regulations and guard against the loss of tree canopy.

The applicant's waiver request includes several measures designed to protect the natural resources of the riparian corridor, including Section 44-4B. – Maximum Tree Removal and Sections 55-4D. & 55-4F.- Tree Replacement/Removals. We recommend the township assess the tree removal and its impact on the tree canopy coverage along the Schuylkill Riverbank. Preserving the riverbank's tree canopy by replacing those trees that will be critically impacted is important in preserving the river's open space and ensuring the riverbank's integrity. We recommend the township consider requiring additional riverside tree plantings so that the riverbank's tree canopy is not diminished.

b. Landscape improvements Needed Along 10 ft. Wide Public Path (Between Courts- B & C)
The landscape plan does not provide greening improvements along the public pathway connecting the Washington St. sidewalk and the riverfront trail. While there is a 25 ft. wide drainage easement that lies nearby, there is an opportunity to add needed greening

improvements. Plantings of smaller native trees and shrubs should be included to increase the greening of the site and provide greater diversity to the landscape.

CONCLUSION

We recommend the township address the above-mentioned issues and comments to its satisfaction. Please note that the review comments and recommendation contained in this report are advisory to the municipality and final disposition for the approval of any proposal will be made by the municipality.

Please be aware that the MCPC number #23-0239-002 has been set aside for the applicant' plan. If any subsequent plans are submitted for final recording, this MCPC number should appear on the applicant sheets within the plans in the box reserved for the seal of this agency.

Should the governing body approve a final plat of this proposal, the applicant must present the plan to our office for seal and signature prior to recording with the Recorder of Deeds office. A paper copy bearing the municipal seal and signature of approval must be supplied for our files.

Sincerely,

Barry W. Jeffries

Barry W Jeffries, ASLA, Senior Design Planner
bjeffrie@montgomerycountypa.gov
(610) 278-3444

c: Aaron Kostyk, Chair, Township Planning Commission
Krista Heinrich, PE, Township Engineer
David Sander, Esq., Township Solicitor
Hightop Real Estate & Development Applicant

Attachment A: Aerial Image of Site
Attachment B: Reduced Copy of Applicant's Proposed Site Plan

ATTACHMENTS A & B

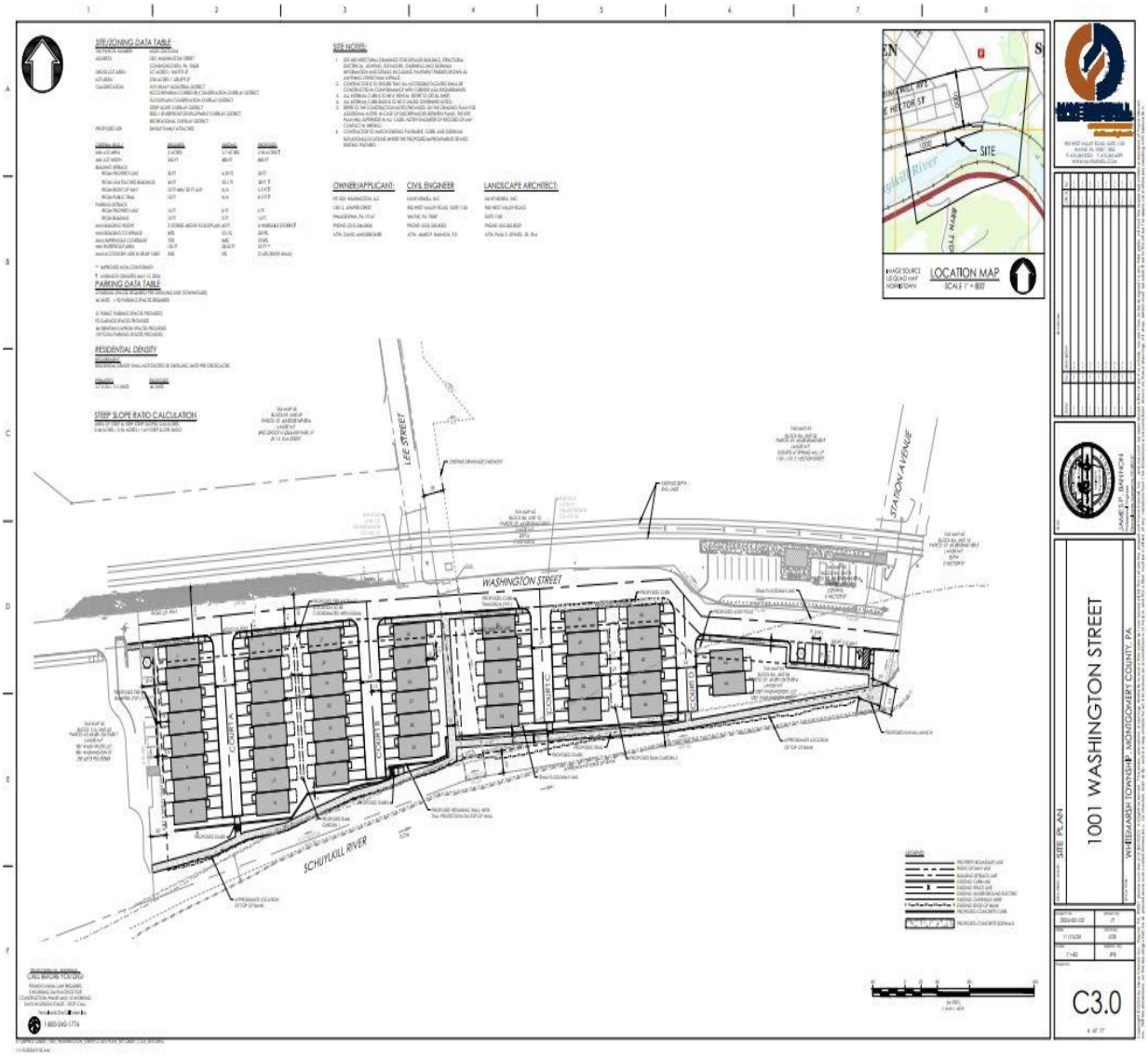


1001 Washington Street
MCPC#220239002

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Aerial photography provided by Nearmap

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SITE/ZONING DATA TABLE
SITE NOTES:
OWNER/APPLICANT:
CIVIL ENGINEER
LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT:
PARKING DATA TABLE
RESIDENTIAL DENSITY
STEEP SLOPE RATIO CALCULATION
LOCATION MAP
SCALE 1" = 800'
SITE
LEE STREET
STATION AVENUE
WASHINGTON STREET
SCHUYLKILL RIVER
SITE PLAN
1001 WASHINGTON STREET
WHITEMARSH TOWNSHIP, MONTGOMERY COUNTY, PA
C3.0