

October 8, 2013
City of Erie, Pennsylvania
ZONING HEARING BOARD
1:00 P.M.

The regular meeting of the Zoning Hearing Board was held on Tuesday, October 8, 2013 at 1:00 p.m., in the City Council Chambers, Municipal Building, 626 State Street.

- MINUTES -

THE FOLLOWING APPEAL WAS HEARD:

Appeal No. 12,050 by Earl E. Knox Company (2118-104) concerning property they own located at the northeast corner of East 12th and Bacon Streets in an M-1 District. The appellant is seeking a use variance to convert a vacant lot to a gasoline service station for natural gas fueling. Per Section 204.19 of the Erie City Zoning Ordinance, gasoline service stations are not a permitted use in the M-1 District.

Findings of Fact

1. The appellant is the Earl E. Knox Company (hereafter referred to as Knox Western); they were represented at the hearing by their president and production manager. Reading from a prepared statement, Mr. Patrick Sechrist, the production manager, began by telling the Board that the proposed facility would be groundbreaking for the area, as there are presently no alternative fuel facilities open to the general public in Erie.
2. Mr. Sechrist told the Board that Knox Western has been a member of the Erie business community since 1930, primarily designing, manufacturing, and repairing reciprocating compressors for various local industries. The proposal before the Board is to build a compressed natural gas fueling station on the Knox Western property at the corner of East 12th and Bacon Streets. The approximately eight to nine hundred thousand dollar investment would represent the first alternative fuel station for the general public in the City of Erie.
3. The proposed fueling station would be similar in design to the diesel station near West 12th and Weschler Streets, according to Mr. Sechrist. However, unlike gasoline and diesel fuel stations, the natural gas container tank would be above ground. Knox Western would be using their existing gas line from National Fuel for the re-supply of station's natural gas. The new facility

- would have two dispensers with a canopy over them. The dispensers would be unmanned, and the self-service station would be open to the public.
4. The Board also heard testimony from the president of the company, David Sechrist. He said that this proposal is meant to be a demonstration project, but added that he believes this project could be just the beginning of a large network of natural gas stations. In the future, there will be an increasing demand for alternative energy sources by an environmentally conscious public.
 5. Mr. Sechrist told the Board that he has spoken with National Fuel about the proposal, and while they acknowledge the increasing demand for natural gas-fueled vehicles (and service stations) in the future, they do not want to make a significant investment in the infrastructure that would be necessary to meet that demand. This provides a great opportunity for companies like Knox Western. It would also hopefully create many new jobs for the area, as Pennsylvania contains the largest known reservoir of natural gas in North America. Thus, the conversion from gasoline or diesel vehicles to the low cost, clean burning natural gas will have a long-term benefit for the whole community, according to Mr. Sechrist.
 6. As a relatively new industry, natural gas fueling stations are not distinguished from traditional gasoline or diesel stations in the Erie City Zoning Ordinance; gasoline service stations are not a permitted use in the M-1 zoning district. Mr. Sechrist told the Board that the East 12th and Bacon Street location had previously been in an M-2 district – where gasoline service stations are a permitted use – but the area was recently rezoned, and the property now sits in an M-1 district. Erie Zoning Office officials confirmed that the area has been changed from M-2 to M-1; they said that there is no reason for the change in the Zoning Office records.
 7. Mr. Sechrist said that the character of the neighborhood would not be altered by the proposed new service station. The vacant corner is already in an industrial area, and is clear after an extensive clean-up project four years ago. No demolition or removal of existing structures or trees would be required. Mr. Sechrist said that Knox Western has installed about two hundred similar stations nationwide. This station, he said, would serve as a show case for the City in this new environmentally conscious era. He reiterated that in the long term the new natural gas-fueled industries will create new jobs, and be an overall economic benefit to the community.

Conclusions

1. The appellant is proposing to build a natural gas fueling station. The station would be similar in design to traditional gasoline or diesel stations, with two self-serve dispensers under a canopy. Unlike traditional stations, however, the storage tank would be above ground.
2. The Erie City Zoning Ordinance does not distinguish between traditional gas stations and those stations that sell natural gas. Under Section 204.19,

- “Gasoline Service Stations” are not a permitted use in an M-1 zoning district; however, they are a permitted in an M-2 district under Section 204.20.
3. The appellant’s property is in an industrial area. It was previously designated as an M-2 zoning district.

Decision

By a unanimous decision, the Board voted to approve the variance. Board Chairman Richard Wagner said that he thinks this is an interesting opportunity, in a traditional manufacturing location, where there is a good deal of truck traffic to support the proposed station. Board members Patty Szychowski and Mike Hornyak agreed, both voting to approve the variance. Mr. Hornyak adding that he too thought this is a great idea and should be a good fit for the proposed location.

It is So Ordered.