

Developer insists there's enough space for 155-acre project near FedEx Ground hub

By PETER BLANCHARD
AND KEVIN DUFFY

A prominent real estate and development company looking to build a logistics center in East Allen Township presented its case to the township's board of supervisors Monday night in the first of what will be a series of public meetings on the project.

Rock-Lehigh Valley LLC, a subsidiary of New York-based Rockefeller Group development company, is seeking a change, or curative amendment, to the East Allen Township zoning ordinance two years after the township's board of supervisors denied the developer's request to rezone a 155-acre parcel from agricultural to light industrial. In its appeal to the township, Rock-Lehigh Valley argues that the zoning ordinance as written is "unduly restrictive" as it fails to provide for sufficient land for the development of warehouses.

Representatives for the developer appeared before the supervisors for a curative amendment hearing Monday night.

Johanna Chervak, director of real estate development for the Rockefeller Group's New Jersey and Pennsylvania region, noted the Lehigh Valley has become a leading market for logistics uses over the last 20 years, making it an attractive choice for the company.

"As the world has moved to an e-commerce economy, the delivery of goods to the end consumer has compressed significantly," Chervak said. "This region can reach about one-third of the U.S. population and half of the Canadian population within



PETER BLANCHARD/SPECIAL TO THE MORNING CALL

Johanna Chervak, director of real estate development for the Rockefeller Group's New Jersey and Pennsylvania Region, delivers testimony Monday at a curative amendment hearing in East Allen Township.

a day's drive, and that's extremely important for retailers."

In 2016, Rock-Lehigh Valley entered into an agreement of sale with the Lehigh-Northampton Airport Authority to secure 260 acres for development. A portion of that land was used for a FedEx Ground distribution center in neighboring Allen Township, and the adjacent 155-acre tract in question would be used for a similar purpose.

Specifically, Rock-Lehigh Valley is looking to construct two warehouses that would encompass roughly 2 million square feet of the property. The project would result in \$265,000 in additional real estate tax income to East Allen Township, Chervak said.

Chervak said the company has developed more than enough infrastructure for the project. She told the board of

supervisors that road improvements to Willowbrook Road, Race Street and Airport Road as part of the FedEx Ground development are designed to handle 3.1 million square feet of building space, short of the total the company has.

She said Rockefeller's vision is to have parcels they are developing east and west of Willowbrook Road in Allen Township near the FedEx Ground hub work in concert with the planned logistics center in East Allen.

She said Lehigh Valley Logistics Park, including 290,000 square feet of warehouse space east of Willowbrook Road and 1 million square feet west of the road, would be paired with up to 2 million square feet of space on the East Allen parcel owned by the Lehigh-Northampton Airport Authority which Rockefel-

ler has an agreement in place to purchase.

Kimberly Freimuth, an attorney representing the township who wants to have the developer's curative amendment thrown out, noted that would use up the 3.1 million square foot capacity the road improvements were intended to allow for.

Adding FedEx Ground, currently at 800,000 square feet with ability to expand to 1.1 million, would exceed that amount still more, she said.

Further, she rejected the premise that East Allen's zoning ordinance doesn't allow for logistics centers.

"I submit to you the logistics center is no more than a fancy name for a warehouse, and a warehouse is a permitted use and therefore this challenge has no merit," Freimuth said as part of her opening statement.

While there was insufficient time for public comment Monday night, audible groans could be heard from the audience when it was revealed that at least one of the warehouses would be 60 feet tall. Residents of the township have resisted the proliferation of warehouses in East Allen, fearing increased truck traffic and the erosion of farmland.

Rock-Lehigh Valley plans to have project engineers testify at the next curative amendment hearing, which is set for 7 p.m. Feb. 19 at the Allen Township Fire Company No. 1, 3530 Howertown Road.

Peter Blanchard and Kevin Duffy are freelance writers for The Morning Call.