

Plainsboro Township

Review School District Capital Project

Application: P20-13

Memo Date: 04/05/2021

Meeting Date: 04/20/2021

DRC Project Review Memo

Name of Applicant: West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District

Type of Application: Referral for review and recommendation on a Capital Project as required under NJ Municipal Land Use Law, N.J.S.A. 40:55D-31a

Name of Project: Wicoff School Additions and Site Improvements

Property Location: 510 Plainsboro Road (Block 1509, Lot 3)

Property Owner: Same as applicant

Zone: R-85 Residential Zone

Present Use of Property: Public School (Grades K to 5)

Adjacent Land Uses: North: Predominately Residential (Plainsboro Road)
South: Residential (Edgemere Avenue)
East: Residential (Edgemere Avenue)
West: Residential (Parkway Avenue)

CAPITAL PROJECT REVIEW OF SCHOOL PROJECTS BY PLANNING BOARD:

Pursuant to New Jersey Municipal Land Use Law (N.J.S.A. 40:55D-31a), the West Windsor-Plainsboro Regional School District (School District) is required to submit plans for capital projects to the Township Planning Board for review relative to the Master Plan; after which the Township may, within 45 days, make a recommendation on the project to the State Department of Education (DOE), which agency must approve the project. With the exception of this required review by the Planning Board, school districts are not subject to the zoning bulk requirements or procedural or development review and approval requirements set forth in the Township's site plan regulations.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION:

Project Need and Scope of Work

This school expansion project is needed to accommodate expected growth in district enrollments due to present and future projected housing starts. The proposed construction will help alleviate the growing enrollment and capacity pressure already taking place in the school district at the elementary school level.

The existing J. V. B. Wicoff Elementary School (Wicoff School) contains 46,300 square feet and serves approximately 430 students in grades K to 5. The proposed project will consist of a new one story 8,400 square foot building addition, upgrades to the existing parking area on the east side of the property, along with supportive stormwater management and utility site improvements.

In addition, the school district is entertaining additional building and site improvement options identified as Alternate Bids in the site plan set. One of the Alternate Bid plans include an approximately 1,500 square foot one story expansion of the proposed base building addition. They are also proposing to add a small (300 sq. ft.) one-story addition to the existing school building, which will function as a new main building entrance to the school, and will contain a security office and a secure vestibule.

The proposed additions to the school are designed to accommodate new kindergarten classrooms, a new music classroom, offices, and restroom facilities. The applicant indicates the proposed building additions will increase the capacity of the school by approximately 84 students, along with four additional staff.

The Alternate Bid plan also includes a number of other site improvements, such as a reconfigured main driveway off Plainsboro Road and reconfiguration of the rear parking lot; both proposed as a result of a traffic study undertaken on behalf of the school district. These circulation and parking improvements are expected to improve traffic flow along Parkway Avenue and Plainsboro Road during the school's morning arrival and afternoon dismissal times. The parking lot reconfiguration will result in a loss of five spaces (64 existing vs. 59 proposed).

In addition to the site circulation and parking improvements proposed under the Alternate Bid plans, the school district is also proposing to replace the two existing storage sheds (approx. 12 ft. by 20 ft. and 12 ft. by 16 ft.) with three 12 feet by 24 feet storage sheds, a new dumpster enclosure, an emergency generator, and school building identification signage.

Upon completion of the additions, interior renovations are proposed in association with an Alternate Bid.

For additional project details, see the Project Narrative provided by the School District's architects and planners, FVHD.

Planning Board Staff Comments and Recommendations

A. Planning and Zoning Issues

1. As noted above, state law requires the school district to refer the proposed building and site improvements to the Planning Board for review relative to the Master Plan, prior to the expenditure of public funds. A review of our current Master Plan (land use and community facilities elements) supports the present School District use of the subject property.
2. The proposed school is subject to the recently adopted Necessary Public Utilities and Services ordinance. Among the standards that apply to such use is §101-13.6B which reads – “The exterior of any structure shall be in keeping with the other structures in the immediate residential neighborhood.” The architectural treatment of the proposed building additions and improvements appear to be “in keeping” with the general character of the existing school building and campus improvements.

B. Plan Review Comments and Recommendations

1. The school property currently includes two existing storage sheds located close to the existing school building and partially screened from view off-site by existing Hemlock trees. The applicant proposes (Alternate Bid) to replace the existing sheds with three new sheds, each measuring 12 feet by 24 feet, located along the north side of the reconfigured parking area. Staff asked the applicant if consideration had been given to substituting the three proposed sheds with a single large shed designed to complement the proposed building improvements. The school district responded by indicating that they proposed the three separate sheds for “organizational purposes,” meaning that one shed would be used for physical education equipment, another for surplus school equipment, and the third for building maintenance and grounds equipment. From their perspective, the three separate shed structures will allow them to keep equipment better organized and will limit access to equipment to the appropriate parties. Foundation plantings are proposed to help soften the appearance of the proposed sheds. The exterior of each of the sheds (including all access doors) will be the same color, and the color selected will be based on compatibility with the materials and colors of the existing and proposed building improvements.
2. The applicant’s plan (Alternate Bid) includes a proposed three-sided masonry dumpster enclosure structure. The proposed enclosure is shown on the plans as being 6 feet 8 inches in height. To protect the inside of the structure from damage during emptying of the dumpsters, the applicant has proposed to install steel bollards. The masonry that is proposed for the enclosure structure will match the masonry used for the new building improvements.

3. The applicant's Alternate Bid plans include an emergency generator that is located just south of the proposed addition. According to the applicant, this location is necessary for the connection to the electrical room in the building addition. The proposed generator will be fueled by natural gas, which offers the benefit of reduced generator height when compared to diesel fuel generators; as well as eliminating the risk of fuel spillage that can occur with diesel generators. The generator unit will measure approximately 12 feet long by 4 feet wide by 6 feet high. The applicant proposes to install an 8 feet high decorative composite wood fence (Trex Seclusions or equivalent) around the generator, along with landscape plantings (five feet tall Red Cedars) around the outside of the fence. In the event the height of the generator is such that the proposed 8 feet high fence can be reduced in height to six feet and still fully screen the generator, staff will work with the applicant to consider replacing the proposed landscaping plantings with lower shrub plantings (e.g., 36 inch tall Skip Cherry Laurel) as accent landscaping around the fence enclosure. The plans do not indicate the color of the proposed fence. To the degree there are color options for the fence, staff recommends the color be based on compatibility with the materials and colors of the existing and proposed building improvements.

The applicant shall provide documentation that the proposed generator complies with all applicable NJDEP noise standards.

4. The applicant's architectural plans identify two building mounted signs on the proposed Alternate Bid building entrance addition. One sign is proposed to be mounted over the entrance doors to the addition. The second one is located on the north side of the entrance addition, so as to be visible as you approach the building entrance from Plainsboro Road. Both signs will be illuminated and involve 12 inch tall aluminum letters mounted to a background surface. The lighting for the sign over the entrance doors will utilize the proposed lighting at that entrance. The lighting for the other sign will utilize an up-light fixture mounted to the building just below the sign.
5. In addition to the two building mounted signs and in association with the school district's Alternate Bid plan for a modified entrance/exit drive off Plainsboro Road, the school district is proposing to install a new freestanding identification sign. The proposed freestanding sign will not be illuminated and includes a sign panel containing 6 inch tall dimensional letters. The sign panel will be supported by two masonry piers that will match the masonry used elsewhere for the project. While the current site plan does not identify the location of this proposed sign, staff will work with the school district's professionals to locate the sign behind the sidewalk and outside the sight triangle created by the modified entrance/exit driveway onto Plainsboro Road.
6. The parking comments in the traffic impact assessment report indicate that the school property is currently served by 64 spaces. The proposed plan will result in the loss of five spaces for a total of 59 spaces. The school district indicates it has no more than 50 full-time staff members who are at the school five days a week.

The remaining staff, which involve approximately 13 individuals (including five lunch aids), include a mix of part-time and transient staff members who are not present at the school every day or for the full day. Based on these staffing characteristics, it is the school districts contention that the 59 spaces will be adequate to accommodate the parking needs of the school. If there is a school day when the number of staff exceed the available parking supply, the part-time staff would utilize the parking spaces available in the church parking lot in accordance with an agreement between the school and the church.

7. The applicant's plan includes information regarding proposed building mounted, bollard type, and freestanding pole lighting. All the proposed fixtures direct light downward, thereby preventing glare that would be visible from nearby residential properties. The applicant has provided light fixture cuts for each of the proposed light fixtures with the exception of the Gardco PBL fixture and same shall be added to the plans. In order to further minimize the impact of these new light fixtures on nearby residences, the school district has agreed with the staff recommendation that all non-security lighting be controlled by a timer that turns off such lighting during the night (e.g., 10:00 PM).
8. In association with this project the applicant needs to remove a number of trees. For example, the main building addition (8,400 square feet) requires the removal of six trees, four evergreen trees and two deciduous or shade trees. All but one of the evergreen trees and one of the shade trees are in fair to poor condition. The one shade tree that is in good condition that needs to be removed is a 26-inch Cherry tree. Applying the approach used on other projects where the applicants agreed to replace healthy trees removed at a ratio of 2:1 for trees under 12 inches in caliper and 3:1 for trees 12 inches and greater in caliper, would result in five replacement trees. Under the applicant's landscape plan, 28 trees are proposed (8 evergreen and 20 shade trees).

In association with the Alternate Bid plan, which includes the modified/widened driveway off Plainsboro Road, the school district's plan calls for the removal of five large shade trees and a row of Hemlock trees. The shade trees measure 24 to 42 inches in caliper. The Hemlock trees are in fair to poor condition; the shade trees are not. Applying the replacement ratio approach used above would result in fifteen replacement trees. Under the applicant's landscape plan twenty shade trees are proposed.

The removal of the five mature shade trees noted above is unavoidable for the Alternate Bid portion of the project to proceed. The landscape planting schedule in the Alternate Bid plan indicates that replacement shade trees are proposed at 1½ to 2 inches in caliper at planting time. Consistent with previous replacement tree planting schedules, staff recommends that the minimum planting size for deciduous trees be 2½ inches in caliper.

9. The Application includes a traffic impact assessment prepared by Dynamic Traffic, dated November 9, 2020, revised March 2, 2021. Staff has the following comments regarding the traffic assessment:
 - a. Traffic volume data was collected via manual turning movement counts at the intersection of Plainsboro Road and Edgemere Avenue in September of 2020. In addition, automatic traffic recorder counts were collected on Edgemere Avenue just east of Prospect Avenue. Recognizing that the traffic volumes have been affected by the pandemic, the applicant's engineer then utilized historical NJDOT traffic volumes on Edgemere Avenue to develop adjustment factors to increase the traffic counts that were collected. Considering the unique nature of the current situation with the pandemic, staff is of the opinion that the methodology is reasonable.
10. The applicant shall obtain a road opening permit at the time of the construction for any improvements within the Township Right-of Way. Construction details, performance guarantees and inspection fees shall be submitted as part of the road opening permit application.
11. The proposed sanitary sewerage system modifications are subject to the review and approval of Suez-Princeton Meadows (SUEZ). In addition, amended utility easements in favor of Suez shall be provided.
12. The proposed water system improvements are subject to the review and approval of New Jersey American Water. The applicant's engineer shall clarify the need for the proposed meter pit in the Edgemere Avenue right of way at the size proposed and verify that no above grade pressure reducing zone devices are necessary for the project.
13. The proposed sanitary sewer lateral and water/fire service are also subject to the review and approval of the Township Construction Official.
14. The applicant proposes an underground stormwater management basin to the east of the proposed building addition and parking area along Edgemere Avenue. The Applicant is also proposing two areas of existing pavement to be removed and replaced with pervious pavement. Township staff has the following comments regarding the stormwater management improvements and analyses:
 - a. The School District's engineer shall submit a Major Development Stormwater Summary Attachment D form in conformance with the requirements of the Township's Tier A Municipal Stormwater General Permit.
 - b. The School District shall provide a Drainage, Maintenance, and Access agreement in favor of Plainsboro Township and the County of Middlesex for the stormwater management system. The agreement shall be subject to the review and approval of the Township

Attorney and Township Engineer.

- c. At the completion of construction, the School District's engineer shall provide an as-built plan of the stormwater management facilities as well as a certification that all proposed stormwater management improvements have been constructed as per plan and will function as originally designed.
15. The School District is proposing an electrical transformer with access drive along the frontage of Edgemere Avenue. Staff recommends that the transformer be screened with landscaping to the extent permissible by the electric utility.
16. To prevent vehicles coming off Plainsboro Road from entering the one-way drive in front of the existing school building, a "Do Not Enter" sign shall be installed to the right of the one-way drive, just before the stop sign serving that drive. Except for the sign message, the sign detail shall match the stop sign detail on Sheet C118.
17. The Stop sign detail on Sheet C118 shall be revised to include the note included with the accessible parking sign that reads – "Rear of signs shall be painted to match the color of the post, dark bronze #313."

STAFF RECOMMENDATION:

As noted above, since the proposed addition and use is consistent with the current Master Plan, staff supports the School District's proposal and recommends that they address the above comments to the satisfaction of Planning Board staff.