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JODY L. HOLTON, AICP
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

November 9, 2015

Revised Letter

Mr. Richard D. Barton, AICP
Community Planner and Zoning Officer
Upper Dublin Township
801 Loch Alsh Avenue
Fort Washington, PA 19034

Re: MCPC 14-0107-003
Plan Name: St. Mary's Villa Conditional Use
Upper Dublin Township

Dear Mr. Barton:

We have reviewed the above-referenced conditional use application as you requested on October 7, 2015. We forward this letter as a report of our review and recommendations.

BACKGROUND

The applicant, Lindenwold Residential Associates, LLC, has submitted a conditional use application to Upper Dublin Township for the development of a 45-acre tract known as St. Mary's Villa/The Mattison Estate located along Bethlehem Pike at Lindenwold Terrace. The development would consist of 32 carriage homes, 72 townhomes and 250 Senior Independent Living Apartments. The site is the former location of a residential service provider for youth and contains a number of historical features, some of which will be preserved. The most notable historic feature on the property, "The Castle" will be retained and renovated to serve as the administrative offices and communal gathering space for the community. A large lake feature on the property will be partially removed and a stream channel re-established. The development will take access off of Bethlehem Pike across from Mattison Avenue. The development is being proposed under the Mixed Use Residential – Historic District which was reviewed twice by this office on July 10, 2014 and again on November 6, 2014 and was adopted by the Township in 2014. The parcel was rezoned to this district on November 11, 2014.



RECOMMENDATION

The Montgomery County Planning Commission (MCPC) generally supports the applicant's proposal, however, in the course of our review we have identified the following issues that the Township may wish to consider prior to conditional use approval. Our comments are as follows.

REVIEW COMMENTS

COUNTY COMPREHENSIVE PLAN

- A. The proposed project meets a number of goals established in the County Comprehensive Plan, Montco2040. The walking trail through the development helps contribute to the goals of providing opportunities to exercise and have healthy lifestyles. The new housing units are an appropriate type of infill development that support surrounding land uses and provide a mix of housing choices for families and individuals at different stages in life. The project also meets the goal of preserving historic properties. We commend the applicant for the adaptive reuse of the "castle" and the restoration work that will be done to it and the other historic elements on the property. However, we feel there are additional opportunities to further strengthen the proposal to support the County goals. To improve transportation choices, we recommend the applicant provide additional sidewalks along Bethlehem Pike that will facilitate better connection into the surrounding community and downtown Ambler for residents to more easily access the amenities there, including the regional rail system, shops and restaurants. We also feel there are additional opportunities to improve on the stormwater management practices proposed on the site. These comments are further detailed, below.

STORMWATER MANAGEMENT

A. Underground Stormwater Facilities

The site plans indicate that all of the stormwater management features along Bethlehem Pike and in the "parterre" and "sunken" gardens will be underground. This design may pose inspection and maintenance problems in the future. We recommend that the municipality require a maintenance plan for stormwater facilities. We recommend instead that stormwater management features be above-ground and decentralized as much as practicable. Surface features like infiltration basins and rain gardens not only serve their intended function to capture stormwater, but they also serve as attractive landscaping amenities that add aesthetic value to the property (*Appendix A and B for example photos*). Because they are on the surface, they will be easier to access for inspection and maintenance. This may also significantly limit the impact that maintenance may have on the above ground gardens. Additionally, although no underground stormwater management facilities are proposed within the courtyards of the senior living complex, those areas in particular would be ideal locations for rain gardens or other surface stormwater features. These functional amenities may be further improved by providing benches for seating around the gardens for resident enjoyment and use of the space.

B. Pavement

The site plan does not indicate if any pervious pavement will be used on the site. We recommend the applicant consider using pervious pavement for some or all of the paved roads. Pervious pavement would serve as an additional component in the stormwater management plan to help infiltrate stormwater on-site. The site plan indicates that some of the walkways will

be constructed of allee/stone chip. It is unclear if all of the trails in the development will be constructed of the same material. We encourage the applicant to use porous concrete or other porous materials like the stone chip for the pathways and trails.

LANDSCAPING AND TREES

A. Landscaping

The planting scheme appears to create an historic “castle landscape” that relies on a formal arrangement to be compatible with the existing and proposed structure and landscape. The conceptual plans do not include a species list or proposed quantities; however, a general assessment of the proposed arrangement can be made which indicates the planting scheme relies heavily on the use of a limited plant palette. This raises some concerns about the long term sustainability of the landscaping and its value as a site improvement.

Several areas such as the “parterre gardens” along the main drive and the “sunken garden” by the lake rely exclusively on either one or two shrubs to frame the space. Monocultures are more susceptible to the possibility of large-scale devastation by both native and foreign introduced insects and disease pests; therefore, greater diversity is recommended in the plant selection of both tree and shrub species. A general rule of thumb by urban foresters and horticultural researchers is to plant: (1) no more than 10% of any one species; (2) no more than 20% of any one genus; and (3) no more than 30% of any one family of plants. We recommend including more native trees, shrubs and grasses in the various landscape arrangements. The Asian species of barberry in particular can be highly invasive, but native species are available. Having a more diverse and multi-layered grouping of plants creates a more naturalistic and attractive appearance. The resulting landscape would be more biologically diverse, sustainable and provide multiple environmental benefits to the entire site.

B. Trees

According to the tree removal plan, just over 75% of the existing trees on the site will be removed. According to the required tree replacement ratio, the applicant is responsible for planting 808 trees yet is only proposing to plant 302 trees. Notes on the site plans indicate the applicant will be pursuing a waiver for this requirement. Because of the extent of development proposed on the site, it would not seem feasible to plant all of the required replacement trees. However, there are additional opportunities for planting more replacement trees not indicated on the conceptual plans. In particular, the area around the lake could be a prime location for additional tree plantings. Trees are an important environmental feature that provide aesthetic and environmental benefits to a site. The Township may wish to consider requiring the applicant to provide a higher replacement rate than is currently proposed, and/or may wish to request that the balance of the replacement trees be planted elsewhere in the township.

SITE FEATURES

A. Sidewalks - External

The adjacent area is generally urbanized with land uses that support pedestrian activity and transit usage. Sidewalks should be provided along the full frontage of the proposed development saving as much of the existing stone wall as possible. We suggest that perhaps a sidewalk could be provided on the inside of the stone wall so that the historic stone wall would

not be impacted by its construction. Pedestrians may also feel safer on the sidewalk because the wall and the increased distance from Bethlehem Pike would create an enhanced buffer. We would also recommend ensuring that there is a sidewalk connection at each corner of the property that connects the internal sidewalk to the external sidewalk. Currently there is a pedestrian connection to the sidewalks along Lindenwold Terrace at the intersection of Bethlehem Pike, but there is no pedestrian connection from the internal sidewalk network to Bethlehem Pike across from Church Street. Presumably this is because there is currently no sidewalk on that side of the street, but if the applicant considers constructing a sidewalk along Bethlehem Pike, we would strongly encourage a connection into the development from that corner as well. Additionally, no crosswalks are proposed to connect the new development to the existing sidewalk network across Bethlehem Pike at either Mattison Avenue or Church Street. We recognize that a sidewalk crossing at Church Street might not be feasible, but we encourage the Township and the applicant to work with PennDOT to ensure there is a pedestrian crosswalk at the signalized intersection at Mattison Avenue in order to enable residents' safe connectivity into Ambler Borough where they can access shops, restaurants and the regional rail.

B. Sidewalks – Internal

Sidewalks are not proposed along both sides of the road throughout the development. We strongly encourage the applicant to include sidewalks on both sides of all roadways in the development so that every individual resident can walk safely from their home onto a sidewalk. This ensures that no resident or their guests parking in the guest parking spaces has to cross the road to access a sidewalk. This may also mitigate any unwanted pedestrian circulation behind or between the homes if individuals cut through the open space areas to access a sidewalk or the parking areas. The provision of sidewalks promotes healthy living and encourages people to walk to their destinations or for leisure and is an excellent source of physical activity for people of all ages.

C. Trail System

We commend the applicant on including interior walking trails that extend beyond the residential areas to connect to the rear of the property at Loch Alsh Avenue, taking walkers past the lake feature. However, we feel that this trail network could be further expanded to provide a complete circular pathway around the lake rather than only along one side of it. We recommend the applicant consider the feasibility of creating this looped pathway along the top of the proposed embankment and connect back to the residential sidewalk network at the rear parking area to avoid going behind the homes that back up to the lake. The lake feature is such a strong and attractive amenity on the site and many residents, especially the residents of the senior community, may enjoy the opportunity to walk around it in its entirety to loop back to the residential areas. This walking path may be especially enjoyable for older individuals who may have difficulty accessing a gym off-site. This kind of trail network is uncommon in developments and may serve as a strong attraction for potential buyers.

D. Building Design, Driveways and Layout

The site plans show all homes face the road with front-loading garages. These front loading garages appear to be prominent features along the home façades and may limit variation in neighborhood form and detract from creating an inviting pedestrian-oriented development. We recommend the applicant consider creating rear loading garages accessed through an alley behind the homes. The applicant may also want to consider adding street parking instead of the

visitor parking strips which will encourage cars to drive slower in the neighborhood. By doing so, the movement of cars will be further separated from pedestrians, creating a safer community that encourages outdoor activity and increases the amount of potential green space to be enjoyed by residents. To further spontaneous interaction among neighbors, we also recommend increasing the size of front porches that serve as the intersection of the public and private realm. Increased opportunities for socializing helps create a shared sense of community and contribute to building strong social networks (*Appendix C for example photos*).

Alternatively, we encourage the applicant to consider modifying some of the garage entrances rather than all of them. The end units would be appropriate locations to build side-loading or rear-loading garages and would add additional variation to the streetscape. Regardless of the location of the driveways, we encourage the applicant to consider paving the driveways with another material besides asphalt that would add additional color and visual interest to the neighborhood. Alternative materials can include brick pavers or stamped concrete.

We would also like to note the direction the homes face. Those homes that border the “sunken garden” and the lake feature all have their rear yards facing the open space amenity. The garden and lake, which are meant to be two prime shared community amenities, may be perceived to be in the “private” domain of these homes because they are effectively private backyards. Pathways provided from the side yards of the row of homes leading into the “sunken garden” may be seen as private walkways for those residents as they lead to the area behind a private home. In order to maximize the community perception of the shared use of these valuable open spaces, we recommend the applicant consider facing the homes toward the feature and provide a larger front porch for reasons stated above.

The architectural renderings provided as part of the applicant’s site plans show attractive buildings that contain a mix of building materials, articulated roof lines and other architectural features. We recommend to the Township that conditional use approval include a requirement that the applicant must use the architectural styles indicated in their plans.

E. Seating Amenities

Although the site features many prominent open space amenities, such as the lake and walking paths, we feel that some of these places could be further enhanced by additional amenities such as benches and gazebos. As previously stated, the “sunken garden” could be enhanced by a more diverse planting scheme and the underground stormwater management facility could be located to the surface as a rain garden. However, if the applicant chooses to retain the garden space as a grassy area, it could be made more accessible to and useful for the residents if it also contained benches and maybe a covered pavilion or gazebo. If the garden is pristinely manicured with no other park-like features, residents may perceive the space to be unwelcoming to them. By installing additional amenities in the garden space, residents may feel more inclined to use it as a recreation space for leisure activities or planned programming like outdoor yoga or tai chi classes. Benches may also be a welcome amenity along the internal trail/walking path for users to rest along their walk or to enjoy the view and wildlife, especially along the lake front area (*Appendix D for example photos*).

F. Historic Preservation

The applicant has provided a scope of work on historic resources for the property. Provisions of the MRH District require that as part of a conditional use application, the applicant must include a historic resource inventory and historic preservation plan. The applicant and the Township

should communicate to ensure the Township is satisfied with the level and nature of historic preservation being proposed.

VEHICULAR CIRCULATION

A. Access Locations

The proposed development is located at on the eastern side of Bethlehem Pike (S.R. 2018) between Lindenwald Terrace and Highland Avenue. Access will be from one full movement driveway opposite Mattison Avenue, one entrance-only driveway opposite Church Street and one entrance-only on Lindenwald Terrace. The two access locations proposed for Bethlehem Pike are appropriate. The entrance-only access opposite Church Street is likely to operate as a right in only for northbound Bethlehem Pike; most left turns from southbound Bethlehem Pike will likely take place at the signalized intersection at Mattison Avenue.

The entrance-only access proposed for Lindenwald Terrace may pose circulation problems. It appears that the access will be limited to entrance-only trips to help minimize cut-through traffic on Lindenwald Avenue. These types of restrictions rarely work as planned. Lindenwald Terrace provides access to/from PA 309 Expressway to the south at Susquehanna Road. Access to PA 309 to/from the south is also provided at Highland Avenue; this access would likely be more convenient to travelers from the proposed development since accessing PA 309 from Lindenwald Terrace would require backtracking. Access to/from north PA 309 is available from Butler Pike and while Lindenwald Terrace does connect to Susquehanna and ultimately Butler Pike, there is no traffic signal at the Lindenwald Terrace/ Susquehanna Road intersection, making the left turn during rush hour very difficult. Therefore, it is very unlikely that commuters from the proposed development would use this route. Given the minor traffic volumes assigned to Lindenwald Terrace (3%) there does not seem to be a compelling reason to limit this access location to entrance only-condition. Distributing traffic more directly to the full roadway network would be preferred.

B. Mattison Avenue Access Design

It is not clear why there needs to be a channelized right turn lane associated with this access design. The northbound traffic volumes are not very high, even in the PM peak hour. A standard right turn radius would be operationally sufficient, would require less overall paving, and would not introduce an additional Yield condition as part of the intersection.

C. Transit Amenities

Two SEPTA bus routes currently run along Bethlehem Pike. Given that the proposed land use includes smaller residential units and senior housing, it is likely that some portion of the population will utilize these services. The applicant may wish to consider creating a more inviting bus stop waiting area, either at Church Road or Lindenwald Terrace. The proposed sidewalk/open space design at the corner at Lindenwald Terrace would lend itself easily to an expanded transit waiting area.

D. SEPTA Coordination

The applicant should coordinate with SEPTA service planner Mark Cassel, SEPTA Service Planning (PH: (215) 580-7238; MCassel@septa.org) to ensure that the proposed new entrance at Mattison Avenue will be compatible with the current and proposed transit services.

E. Trip Generation

The TIS uses the Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE) "Trip Generation Manual" (9th Edition, 2012) Land Use Code Residential Condo/Townhouse to generate trips for the single family twins and single family attached dwellings. These units are proposed to have three bedrooms and two car garages making them more like single family homes than residences for single people or childless couples. It is likely that they will generate vehicle trips more in line with the Land Use Code for Single Family Detached Housing. The ITE Manual indicates that the average rate of vehicle trips for a Single Family Detached House is 9.52 trips per day while the average rate of vehicle trips for a Residential Condominium/Townhouse is 5.81 trips per day. This adjustment to the trip generation rates may require adjustments to the proposed improvements to Bethlehem Pike. It should be noted that the TIS does not take a trip adjustment for transit use or pedestrian trips as part of the overall trip generation used in the study. Promotion of transit use and pedestrian access may be appropriate mitigations to the increase in overall trips generated.

F. Transportation Impact Study

The TIS notes that the build-out year for the proposed development is 2016. Given that it is already late 2015 and the total amount of site work and sales activity that would be required to reach full build-out, it might be more accurate to use a full build-out year of 2017.

WATER FEATURES

A. Stream Restoration

The applicant is proposing to retain a portion of the lake, remove the dam, reestablish the stream, and remove the perimeter wall around the lake. We support the incremental improvement of restoring a portion of the stream. We encourage the applicant to provide a detailed plan to the Township that explains who will be doing the work, what the installation plan is, and what the long-term maintenance plan is. We also recommend the applicant make clear if the features will belong in common ownership to the development and maintained by an HOA or if they will be dedicated to the Township.

B. Loch Linden Lake

The lake will remain on the site, but reduced in size. This feature will be the largest natural feature of the development. In order to ensure that the lake remains an attractive amenity, the applicant is encouraged to provide a detailed plan that explains the proposed water source for the lake and how water will move through the lake so that the water does not become stagnant. Stagnant bodies of water will grow algae which can be detrimental to the wildlife in the pond, creates an unpleasant visual aesthetic and can be malodorous.

CONCLUSION

We wish to reiterate that MCPC generally supports the applicant's proposal, but we feel that our comments will contribute to creating a socially active and environmentally sustainable community with a multitude of amenities to be enjoyed by all the different residents of the community.

Please note that the review comments and recommendations contained in this report are advisory to the municipality and final disposition for the conditional approval of any proposal will be made by the municipality.

Sincerely,



Margaret Dobbs, Community Planner
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c: Bohler Engineering, Applicant's Representative
Paul A. Leonard, Township Manager
Wesley J. Wolf, Chairman, Township Planning Commission
Jeffrey A. Wert, P.E., P.L.S., Township Engineer

Appendix: A. Example Photo – Rain garden for entry drives
B. Example Photo – Small rain garden along a sidewalk
C. Example Photo – Townhomes with no front garage
D. Example Photo – Bench and gazebo amenities around lake

A. Small rain garden along a sidewalk



B. Rain garden for entryway drives



C. Townhomes with no front garages



D. Bench and gazebo amenities around lake

