

Planning Commission Meeting
September 14, 2016
Verbatim Excerpt

2232-D16-28 – SCHOOL BOARD OF THE CITY OF FALLS CHURCH

Decision Only During Commission Matters
(Public Hearing held on July 21, 2016)

Commissioner Ulfelder: Before we move toward a motion, after the – we had the public hearing on July 21st and on the 28th we further deferred the decision on the Mount Daniel Elementary School 2232. And some addition information had been submitted and I wanted to make sure that all of the Commissioners that had an opportunity to see that. There was an addendum to the original traffic study, a second memo from the County Department of Transportation for reviewing that addendum and there was a letter from the attorney for the applicants concerning commitments and how those commitments might be maintained going forward so that there is certainty as to what is going to – what would occur on this property if we – if we agree with staff's recommendation. And so I just wanted to see, I have no questions, but I wanted to see if any of the Commissioners may have any questions. We have staff here from DOT and the staff that analyzed this application and before I begin I just wanted to see if anyone has any questions.

Chairman Murphy: Ms. Hurley.

Commissioner Hurley: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. For the transportation, I'm still unclear on why an alternate path that's right-in only will not work. I read the analysis with something about you'd have to change the intersection or add a turn lane or something. I'm just looking for more details on why a right lane in, circle around the school and then exit via the existing road, which would cut the amount of traffic on the existing road and make it one way out. Could I have somebody from Transportation explain why that would not work?

Kristin Calkins, Transportation Planner, Department of Transportation: Kirstin Calkins, Department of Transportation. We haven't investigated that in detail, the information that the Wells memo addressed were the two other access points that had been asked about at the previous Planning Commission hearing. From a grade and amount of coverage that would be associated with that, I think it might be difficult for the school to accommodate a right-in from Mount – from North Highland and then circle around the school to connect to the existing parking lot. It would require a decent amount of re-sloping and grading of the sight; however, we have not investigated that and that was not an option in the review of the memo provided by Wells.

Chairman Murphy: Okay, anyone else?

Commissioner Sargeant: Mr. Chairman?

Chairman Murphy: Mr. Sargeant.

Commissioner Sargeant: Quick question, just as – as a form of summary of what you've detailed analysis, in terms of traffic and other issues, but I'm wondering if we get a brief summary of what actions, if any, have been initiated following the public hearing in terms of traffic

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mitigation, off-site parking. I see the study it would be helpful, I think, if we could see a summary of additional actions, if any, that have been taken to address the issues.

Chairman Murphy: Before we – do we go on verbatim? We're on verbatim. The reader's digest version would be appreciated.

Commissioner Ulfelder: Well, I think that the September 13th letter from Mr. McGranahan discusses the points as to the commit – some of the commitments concerning traffic management. Specifically, he is talking about the, about. I think it's a two part answer. I think the Wells study and the Wells addendum show that there will not significant traffic problems on North Oak as a general rule at the proposed new daily enrollment of not exceeding 660 students. And then I think that you combine that with the fact that they are building and expanding the parking lot and, as part of that, are building an area for better queuing of buses and separate kiss-and-ride drop off for private vehicles as well. And they are agreeing to – they are committing to certain hours for – for the school operations, which put them in a slightly different place in relation to rush hour traffic, both in the p.m. and in the – in the a.m. and the p.m. They are going to be make – they - they've offered a commitment concerning parents on the number of students who will be arriving by buses and when parents do come for school-related appointment or whatever they will have to park or they should be parking on the school grounds, not on North Oak. There are a number of these that are sort of listed in the letter and they are also actually part of the – the material that was submitted as part of the overall plan for the 2232. The plan goes into great detail, far more than we usually get with a 2232, as to what commitments the city and the school board are willing to make in connection with the operation of the school on this site.

Commissioner Sargeant: Thank you Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Murphy: Mr. Ulfelder.

Commissioner Ulfelder: Okay, thank you Mr. Chairman. As I mentioned, on July 21st we held a public hearing on the Falls Church City Public School Board's latest proposal to renovate and expand the Mount Daniel Elementary School which is a city school located in Fairfax County. On July 28th, I moved that we defer the decision to this evening to give us time to consider all of the information and testimony presented at the hearing. As well as to address the questions and issues raised by members of the Planning Commission and the speakers. Since the public hearing the applicant has submitted additional material concerning the possible impacts of the proposed expansion of up to 660 students, a further reduction from the 742 originally requested with the current application, as well as information about any additional access route to the school. In addition, the applicant has submitted a letter indicating its strong and enforceable commitment to limit the scope of requested approval under 2232 and to include in that scope certain terms including traffic management measures. As the Commissioners are aware, the applicant has traveled a long road to get to this evenings decision. Indeed a similar application to expand Mount Daniel came before us last year – from my view, the applicant has materially improved its proposal. Most significantly, the applicant reduced its proposed capacity from 792 students in last year's application to 742 students in the current application, with a further reduction to 660 students. These reductions were based, in part, on a traffic analysis completed for the applicant by Wells and Associates, supplemented by an addendum based on the further reduction to 660

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students, looking at the possible impacts of the proposed expansion on the surrounding area as well as North Oak Street, the sole access road for the school. The applicant also reduced the maximum building height from 60 feet to 41 feet and reduced the overall FAR from 0.29 to 0.25. While reducing its overall intensity from the previous application, the applicant has still committed to provide a 105 parking spaces at the school in an effort to minimize any need for school personnel or visitors to park on North Oak Street. I commend the applicant for its efforts to address many of the concerns raised last year. To put the application in perspective, Mount Daniel has been in the present location since 1952. While the surrounding area and the school have grown, the school has maintained mature trees and considerable vegetation that serve as a buffer between itself and the nearby homes. The applicant has committed to maintain this vegetation to the greatest extent possible, which is in keeping with Plan guidance. To recap some of the essential features of this proposal, the current school enrollment is around 348 students, although that number has been as high as 421. The school is served by a 44,118 square-foot building and two trailers. The application now proposes to add an additional 35,720 gross square feet to the structure with up to three stories in one portion of the building and a maximum building height of 41 feet. If approved, the expansion would increase the floor area ratio on the site from 0.14 to 0.25. Staff points out that under the Zoning Ordinance, a public school in the R-4 District could be up to 60 feet in height with a 0.35 FAR, although it is doubtful that they could achieve that maximum on this site. The applicant has committed to remove the existing trailers once construction is complete and it will prohibit installation of any future trailers. The existing parking lot will be redesigned and expanded from 64 spaces to 105 spaces, with improved circulation to allow for a kiss-and-ride drop off area, increased on-site vehicle stacking capacity and separate bus and vehicle travel ways. The Commission is charged with determining whether the location, character and extent of the applicant's proposal are substantially in accord with the Comprehensive Plan. Staff prepared a thorough report recommending approval and I agree with staff's recommendation. I won't restate everything set out in the report, but I will briefly address the reasons I believe that this application conforms to the Plan. As to location, the analysis is fairly straightforward in that the school has existed at this location since 1952. The school particularly satisfies Plan guidance to site elementary schools in or on the periphery of residential areas. Likewise, as to character, the Comprehensive Plan depicts a school at this location and indeed the Plan encourages locating students in residential districts as long as any adverse impacts can be appropriately mitigated. The applicant has included great detail on its plan and in its application, far beyond that typically included in 2232 application, much of which is intended to mitigate the impact of the proposed expansion. It is, of course, the extent of the proposed expansion that is mainly at issue this evening. In determining the extent of the proposed facility - whether the extent of the proposed facility is substantially in accord with the terms of the Comprehensive Plan, I reviewed the provisions cited in the staff report. Objectives 2 and 3 of the Public Facilities Section of the Policy Element of the Comprehensive Plan are directed at maintaining facilities in accord with expected levels of service objectives and balancing the provision of public facilities with growth and development. As a result of recent and anticipated growth in the number of students and the need for additional capacity, the applicant is seeking to expand this public facility to help meet that need. At the same time, to mitigate impacts on the adjacent neighborhood, as directed by Objective 4, the applicant reduced this proposed expansion in order to mitigate traffic impacts on the neighborhood. The applicant has also committed to providing four specific management measures to help minimize the traffic impact on the North Oak Street residents. To further mitigate any visual impacts, the proposed

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expansion would raise the building's height to only 41 feet, which is only 6 feet higher than some of the neighboring houses. And even this increase would only be to a portion of the building, the rest would remain at its current height. I also reviewed Objective 10, which encourages full utilization of existing student facilities whenever possible and reasonable, to support educational and community objectives. Even though this is a public school of a neighboring jurisdiction, it is still a public school and has been deemed a public use. In considering the educational needs of the city's growing student population, the city must provide a place for each child from the jurisdiction. Expanding the existing Mount Daniel Elementary School is certainly one way to fully utilize the facility and meet the city's legal obligation. More specifically, Objective 10, policy a, states that schools should build additions appropriate to minimize the need for new facilities and that is exactly what the Falls Church City School Board proposes to do. We also heard testimony from the chairman of the city school board, the mayor, and Mount Daniels principal, in addition to the applicant's attorney, all of whom committed on the record to abide by and enforce the detailed limitations in the application. Therefore, given the detailed application, the plan notes, the express commitments made on the record, my review of the Plan and the recommendation of staff I MOVE THAT THE PLANNING COMMISSION FIND THAT THE LOCATION, CHARACTER AND EXTENT OF 2232-D16-28, TO BE IN SUBSTANTIAL ACCORD WITH THE ADOPTED COMPREHENSIVE PLAN BASED ON THE FOLLOWING GROUNDS:

FIRST, BASED ON THE APPLICANT'S EXPRESSED COMMITMENTS TO THE FOLLOWING LIMITED SCOPE, AS REFLECTED IN THE SEPTEMBER 13TH, 2016, LETTER FROM THE APPLICANT'S COUNSEL SUBMITTED FOR RECORD:

1. MOUNT DANIEL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL WILL BE LIMITED TO A MAXIMUM CAPACITY OF 660 STUDENTS;
2. AFTER EXPANSION, THE SCHOOL WILL BE APPROXIMATELY 79,491 SQUARE FEET AND THE APPLICANT HAS AGREED NOT TO INITIATE ANY REDUCTIONS IN LAND AREA;
3. THE SCHOOL WILL BE LIMITED TO A MAXIMUM HEIGHT OF 41 FEET AND WILL PROVIDE 105 PARKING SPACES IN THE REDESIGNED AND EXPANDED PARKING AREA; AND
4. THE SCHOOL WILL REMOVE ALL EXISTING TRAILERS FROM THE PROPERTY ONCE CONSTRUCTION HAS BEEN COMPLETED AND WILL THEREAFTER PROHIBIT ANY TRAILERS, MODULARS OR THE LIKE FROM BEING PLACED ON THE PROPERTY.

FURTHER, BASED ON THE APPLICANT'S COMMITMENTS TO FULLY IMPLEMENTING THE FOLLOWING FOUR TRAFFIC MANAGEMENT MEASURES ALSO REFLECTED IN THE LETTER:

1. BUS AND VEHICLE QUEUES SHALL BE ACCOMMODATED ON-SITE;

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2. CLASSES SHALL NOT BEGIN EARLIER THAN 8:50 A.M. AND NOT END LATER THAN 4 P.M.;
3. PRIOR TO EACH SCHOOL YEAR, THE APPLICANT SHALL SEND A LETTER TO ALL PARENTS OF CHILDREN ENROLLED AT THE SCHOOL TO STRONGLY ENCOURAGE BUS RIDERSHIP AND TO ADVISE THEM NOT TO PARK ON NORTH OAK STREET AND TO PARK ONLY ON SCHOOL PROPERTY FOR SCHOOL RELATED TRIPS; AND
4. THE APPLICANT SHALL HOLD NO MORE THAN 10 EVENING SPECIAL EVENTS PER YEAR AT THE SCHOOL AND SHALL PROVIDE SHUTTLE BUS SERVICE FROM AN OFF-SITE LOCATION IN THE CITY OF FALLS CHURCH FOR PARENTS TO ATTEND ALL SUCH EVENTS.

THIS APPROVAL DOES NOT CONTEMPLATE ANY INCREASE IN THE INTENSITY OF THIS USE OR ANY BREACH OF THESE COMMITMENTS. CONSEQUENTLY, I FURTHER MOVE THAT NO FURTHER EXPANSION WILL BE PERMITTED WITHOUT A SUBSEQUENT 2232 OR OTHER REQUIRED ZONING APPROVAL.

Commissioner Migliaccio: Second.

Chairman Murphy: Second the motion. Okay, Mr. Migliaccio seconded the motion. Is there a discussion of the motion?

Commissioner Flanagan: Yes, Mr. Chairman.

Chairman Murphy: Yes, Mr. Flanagan.

Commissioner Flanagan: Yes, I – first of all I'd like to compliment Commissioner Ulfelder for the talent that he brought forward in coming up with a resolution that is itemized in the motion that tonight, which I've seen for the first time. But I will not be able to support the resolution and, for two reasons. First of all, my sympathies lie with the 33 percent of the citizens of Falls Church who would like to have their school within the attendance area rather than on the edge. And the reason why I say that is because I have good reason since in Mount Vernon we have the only school in Fairfax County that's not located in its attendance area. And that has had a detrimental effect upon the students who attend that school. They are 100-percent bused. None of them can walk to their school and so consequently, I'm working at the present time to see to it that, that school is relocated back within its attendance area. Secondly, I have – and I think that the 33 percent would be quickly joined with others were that pursued as having it relocated within the city. Second, I have seen no evidence put forth by anybody that the current – we had a lot of people here testifying on Oak Street – that the traffic on there was terrible with the current population and I've seen nothing that says that adding students to the population will improve that in any way. I've seen no way – there's nobody suggested how that stretch of roadway is going to be improved with this additional traffic. So there's been, you know, encouraging students to go by bus rather than private car, but that's encouraging. That doesn't assure anything

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really. So, I think it's rather weak in that regard so I will be, I'm not going to vote against this motion, but I am going to abstain.

Chairman Murphy: Further discussion? Mr. Hart.

Commissioner Hart: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. This has been a difficult case for all concerned and I think we recognize that this is a very unique situation where we have a school site that's owned by an adjacent jurisdiction within the County. There is a lot at stake for a lot of people depending on what we do. I think three of us were here 10 or 15 years ago when we did the last expansion of the school and I think I still remember how long it took to do that and how difficult and painful that was. I want to commend Commissioner Ulfelder for a very thorough and careful review and consideration of what do we do with a situation like this. I am going to support the motion, I want – I want to make a couple observations as well. I think the most problematic aspect of the application, at least as of now, is just the extent component of location, character and extent. But - and I think it's a very close call - but I've satisfied myself that in this unique situation, we can view the extent of the application not as what was originally requested perhaps, but as more narrowly defined by what the applicant has settled on with these specific limitations or constraints on the number of activity – on the amount of activity. And to that extent, I think staff concurs with that assessment and I'm going to – I'm going to support that. It concerned me a year ago, very much, and I think I wasn't the only one, that there was an apparent disconnect between the expectations of the applicant about what they could do on their property and our responsibility for review and recommendations about every site in Fairfax County no matter who the owner was. I think that given where we've come down on this, the site is probably maxed out. I think it would be very difficult to conceive of a situation where any more intensity would go on this site. And I think some of the Falls Church folks - the decision makers are listening tonight - I would suggest, this is just my own personal view, but I think it behooves the Falls Church decision makers to come up with a long range plan that anticipates the limitations of this site and that further expansion of this site is not something to be taken for granted. It's not something that is going to be easy and it shouldn't be expected that it can be done in a short time frame or – or – or just for the asking. I – I would point out, as well, a week from tomorrow we have an ordinance amendment coming up which would make this application, or ones like it – I shouldn't say this application – but applications in this category and we haven't decided what to do on that ordinance amendment, but they will become, if the ordinance amendment passes, a special exception rather than a 2232 so we wouldn't be doing this anyway. We would be doing it as an, as an SE. And that may be a further reason to expect that – there's got to be a long range plan for something else, somewhere else that doesn't depend on this site being further intensified. I think we want to be good neighbors and we have to work together to do that and that – that takes, I think, some understanding that this site can only give so much. There is only so much you can put on Oak Street and I think we are probably at that point. But I am going to support the motion for tonight. Thank you.

Chairman Murphy: Ms. Hurley.

Commissioner Hurley: Sorry, the microphone won't go on. Let me use my neighbors here, they – okay I got it. I will try to be concise. I am disappointed that the right-in only was not investigated more thoroughly and it might not work but I would still wish it had been investigated more

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thoroughly. I also will support the motion tonight, but I wish that this letter dated yesterday from Mr. McGranahan had been a bit more specific in its commitments for specific points. It says that, “the school system – the school will not initiate a reduction in land area.” I’d like to say, “initiate or support a reduction in land area.” It says – that last point is, “All temporary classrooms and construction trailers shall be removed. No new trailers or modular or the like should be permitted.” Well, what about storage sheds? What about air condition – other things that might be built? I’d like to see more specific – I wish there had been more specifics. Third point says that, “There will be more than 10 special evening events.” What are special events? Okay, back to school night, obviously, but what about PTA meetings? What about other evening events? Just be more specific on special events. And the fourth one, on the community use, we actually – in Fairfax County – we do use our elementary schools for community use. The soccer fields are used, gyms are used, et cetera. I’d like to see – I wish there had been more specifics but we just received this letter today so I didn’t have a chance to comment, but I will support the motion.

Chairman Murphy: Further discussion? Okay, all those in favor of the motion to approve 2232-D16-28, say aye.

Commissioners: Aye.

Chairman Murphy: Opposed? Motion carries.

Commissioner Flanagan: I abstain.

Chairman Murphy: There is one abstention, Mr. Flanagan. Thank you very much.

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(The motion carried by a vote of 8-0-1. Commissioner Flanagan abstained. Commissioners Hedetniemi, Lawrence and Strandlie were absent from the meeting.)

TMW