



THE MARYLAND-NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION

March 28, 2003

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** The Montgomery County Planning Board

**VIA:** John A. Carter, Chief *JAC*  
Community-Based Planning Division

**FROM:** *KO*  
Kristin O'Connor, Bethesda-Chevy Chase/North Bethesda Team  
Community-Based Planning Division

Marion Clark, Environmental Section  
Countywide Planning Division

**SUBJECT:** Forest Conservation Plan:  
Athletic Field for Westland Middle School and Little Flower Church  
School, 5511 Massachusetts Avenue  
Bethesda-Chevy Chase Master Plan, and

Mandatory Referral No. 02202-MCPS-1  
Athletic Field for Westland Middle School and Little Flower Church  
School, 5511 Massachusetts Avenue  
Bethesda-Chevy Chase Master Plan

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This combined staff report provides recommendations on 1) the Forest Conservation Plan, and 2) the Mandatory Referral for the Athletic Field for Westland Middle School and Little Flower Church. This project was deferred from the Planning Board hearing of June 6, 2002, and postponed from the Planning Board hearing on March 20, 2003.

**1. STAFF RECOMMENDATION: Forest Conservation**

The staff recommends approval of the Preliminary Forest Conservation Plan with the following conditions:

- A Final Forest Conservation Plan (FCP) must be submitted and approved prior to issuance of sediment and erosion control permits. The FCP must address all of the following issues before approval will be granted:

- 1) The Final FCP shall be prepared by a qualified professional and shall fully meet the directives of the M-NCPPC Forest Conservation Regulations #1-01, Section 109B. The FCP shall include the delineation of significant and specimen tree critical root zones (CRZ) and determination of significant impacts (greater than 30% encroachment) based on the proposed grading and site plan.
- 2) The proposed grading and location of the retaining wall shall be adjusted and moved to reduce encroachment on the CRZ of the 45" Black Oak tree (identified as tree no. 30 on the NRI/FSD) to less than 30%. Subject to the Department of Permitting Services the number, size and location of proposed stormwater management structures shall be examined to reduce the total amount of encroachment.
- 3) After disturbance has been minimized, stress reduction measures shall be identified on the plan, as recommended by the qualified professional. The plan shall identify appropriate stress reduction measures designed to minimize root destruction and maximize root regrowth. Tree save measures shall include, but not be limited to, pre-construction watering and fertilizing, fencing, root pruning and dead wood pruning of any trees impacted by construction activities.
- 4) Mitigation for forest loss must be indicated on the Final FCP.

**2. STAFF RECOMMENDATION: Mandatory Referral No. 02202-MCPS-1**

The staff recommends the approval of the Mandatory Referral, and the following comments should be transmitted to the Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS):

- a. Restripe the parking lot to meet the parking standards for the church.
- b. Retain the trees along the property line on the north side of the field.
- c. Provide sufficient landscaping and screening to buffer the adjacent neighbors from the proposed field.
- d. Submit and obtain approval of a Final Forest Conservation Plan prior to permitting.

**PROJECT HISTORY**

On June 13, 2001, the Planning Board reviewed the mandatory referral for the construction of an athletic field for the Westland Middle School and the Little Flower Church School. After extended discussion regarding forest retention and public access from the Planning Board and the community, the applicant agreed that action on this project be deferred. This deferral by the applicant was intended to give the school system and the Little Flower Church School the opportunity to relocate the athletic field away from MCPS property. The Planning Board recognized that the relocation would require a reduction of the number of existing parking spaces and existing green space on the Little Flower Church School site.

The Planning Board expressed concerns regarding the balancing of several priorities: the need for more fields in the down-county area, particularly for smaller children; the private use of public property; compatibility with adjacent residences; the church school's parking requirements; the public benefit from the field; and the need to preserve a mature forest with significant specimen trees as required by the Forest Conservation Law. The Forest Conservation Law requires providing the best alternative plan that preserves additional trees. The Planning Board recognized the need for the field for the school and as an additional field in the down-county area, but expressed concern about tree preservation and inadequate provisions for public use of the field. The Planning Board strongly supported the relocation of the field and the removal of parking, with reconfiguration of the lot. The Planning Board deferred action to allow the applicant to review the possibilities related to relocating the field and preserving more forest.

Several meetings with the applicant and the community were held after the Planning Board hearing to discuss the outstanding issues regarding the Little Flower field plan and complying with Chapter 22a of the Montgomery County Code, the Forest Conservation Law. At these meetings, several options for the field's orientation were shown in an effort to improve the layout of the field.

## **PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

Little Flower and Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) have significantly revised the plan to create a field, measuring 130-feet by 220-feet. The plan shifts the location of the field onto a portion of the Little Flower parking lot (removing 15,900 s.f. of pavement). To meet the Forest Conservation Law and to address the comments suggested at the June 2002 Planning Board hearing, staff and the applicant explored various "options" that would be suitable for the community, the school and the church, and meet Forest Conservation Law. The applicant selected an option that sites the majority of the field on the Little Flower site and a small fraction on the Westland Middle School site (MCPS property). The plan demonstrates less tree removal, including significant and specimen trees, than the applicant's previously submitted plans.

### **Site Description**

Westland Middle School property consists of 25.1 acres in the R-60 zone. The school building is situated on the eastern portion of the property on a bluff adjacent to Westbard Avenue. The only vehicular entrance to the public school is from Massachusetts Avenue via a shared driveway (with the library). The school's current athletic fields are located on the northern boundary also adjacent to Westbard Avenue. There are two parking areas located on school property. One parking area is adjacent to the south side of the building, and the larger parking area extends westerly across the mid-portion of the site, almost to the Little Flower property. The current school population is 1,029 students. There are currently 124 parking spaces, two delivery-loading spaces and a bus-loading area. A wooded area containing some steep slopes and a drainage path runs along the western boundary adjacent to Little Flower.

The Little Flower Church School is located on 11.35 acres in the R-60 zone on the north side of Massachusetts Avenue adjacent to the western boundary of Westland Middle School. The school is a Catholic elementary school sponsored by the Church of the Little Flower Parish. It is operated in accordance with the mandates of the State of Maryland under the supervision of the Catholic Schools Office of the Archdiocese of Washington. Little Flower has an enrollment of 270 students (pre-kindergarten through eighth grade). The Little Flower Church property is improved with the school buildings, gymnasium, Rectory, and Sanctuary. The site currently provides 305 parking spaces. The church seats 900, requiring 225 parking spaces.

The proposed field is bounded on the north by Jordan Road, on the west by the Little Flower Church and parking lot, on the south by Massachusetts Avenue, and to the east by the School Board's property line and a fraction of Westland Middle School. The proposed site topography is severe and the grade change is 30 feet across the property from west to east.

### **Cooperation Between the Church of the Little Flower and Westland Middle School**

The Church of the Little Flower and the Westland Middle School have existed cooperatively as neighbors for many decades. The church and the school have maintained a good neighbor status with each other as well as the neighboring residential community.

In 1959, the church and the school exchanged parcels of land with each other to square-up their individual properties. The new boundary configuration provided more efficient use of their sites. The church parking area, which is immediately adjacent to the school, has provided overflow parking for many school functions. There is an existing pedestrian walkway between the two sites that connects their parking.

## **ANALYSIS**

### **Master Plan Findings**

Both schools are in the Bethesda-Chevy Chase Master Plan area. The 1990 Master Plan includes the following guidance:

*When new uses are programmed for school sites, compatibility with the neighborhood must be maintained. The degree to which a new use is incorporated into the existing community fabric is crucial. The mandatory referral process should be used to ensure that proposals for school modernization, additions and reuses are compatible with the surrounding area. Issues to address include:*

- 1. Traffic and parking controls*
- 2. Sensitive siting of additions*
- 3. Landscaping and parking lot screening*

*Traffic and Parking:* The field is not expected to generate any additional traffic or parking challenges. The proposed field will not be used for increased activities or will it add more students to either school. The field is being proposed for existing MCPS programs, the Little Flower School physical education program and the community.

*Sensitivity Siting:* The proposed field provides for greater sensitivity to the specimen trees and provides further compatibility with the adjacent neighborhoods. The relocation of the field onto the majority of Little Flower's property will save 17 more significant trees and meet Forest Conservation requirements. Since the intention of the proposed field is to allow for programmed school classes and for activities during recess periods, the proposed field will protect much of the tree stand while providing the necessary recreation space required for school activities.

In sum, staff supports the proposed field to retain a significant portion of the highest priority forest that will supply sufficient screening to buffer the field from the neighbors. In addition, a northwest to southeast orientation is the preferable option for regulation and junior size soccer fields, as denoted in the *Recreation Guidelines: Guidelines for the Recreation Amenities in Residential Developments*, approved and adopted by the Planning Board in September 1992.

*Landscaping and Screening:* The applicant proposes screening along the field from the neighbors along Jordan Road.

The Master Plan also recommends that:

*Existing public facilities already provide a range of programs and activities that enhance life in the Planning Area. But where there is space available on the site for expansion, community-enhancing functions should be planned. Such facilities should be linked to the neighborhood by pedestrian and bicycle paths. (Page 149)*

The field proposal will serve as outdoor classroom space for the Physical Education program and for activities during recess periods throughout the Little Flower school day. The field will be utilized for various sports such as soccer, lacrosse, football, baseball, and softball. Additionally, it will be used as a practice field for teams that participate in the parish sports programs. It is anticipated that other community athletic opportunities will present themselves after the field becomes operational.

### **Development Standards**

The project will meet the parking requirements of the school (with 28 faculty and staff) as well as provide the necessary parking for the 900-seat church (225 spaces).

### **Environmental Findings (See Attachment 4)**

All Mandatory Referrals must meet Forest Conservation requirements. A Final Forest Conservation Plan must be approved prior to issuance of sediment and erosion control and stormwater management permits by the Department of Permitting Services (DPS).

Approval of the final Forest Conservation Plan by the Planning Board is required for issuance of the DPS permits. The Forest Conservation Law requires that “*any available planning and zoning options that would result in the greatest possible forest retention*” be employed for highest priority forest stands. The applicant’s smaller and reoriented field removes significantly less specimen trees than the previous application.

*Forest Conservation:* The health, composition, and size of trees within this 3.5-acre highest priority forest<sup>1</sup> stand are unusual in the down-county setting of this site. The mature forest stand is dominated by healthy Black Oak, White Oak and Yellow Poplar with an understory composed of Cherry, Red Maple, Beech, Holly, Muscledwood, and Dogwood. Most of the trees are between 20” and 30” diameter breast high (dbh), however there are 19 specimen trees (30” dbh and over) and 26 significant trees (24” – 30” dbh).

### **Transportation Findings**

The proposed field will have no significant impact on the area’s transportation system. The proposal will not add any new students or increase activities on site; therefore, no additional trips are expected to be generated to the site. Since the field is being established for existing MCPS programs, Little Flower School physical education program and the community, staff believes the athletic field has no traffic impact.

*Access and Circulation:* Access to the field will be gained from the existing Westland Middle School’s north parking lot and from the Little Flower Church School parking lot. Based on the location of the proposed field, there is no need for additional roads or driveways to access the field.

*Policy Area Review/Staging Ceiling Analysis:* The site is located within the Bethesda-Chevy Chase policy area, which has a remaining capacity of 301 jobs and 5,627 housing units as of January 31, 2003.

### **COMMUNITY CONCERNS**

Representatives from the adjacent community were involved throughout the development of this project and are convinced that the new field design will provide for the preservation of the old growth forest and provide compatibility with the neighborhood. (Note: The attached letters are in response to the applicant’s previously submitted plan.) Staff met with the community and received support for any field location options that would preserve the mature forested area.

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<sup>1</sup> Highest priority forest stands are those that exhibit all of the following characteristics: high structural and species diversity; few alien or invasive species present; very good overall stand health; and high potential to provide a significant amount of habitat for forest interior dwelling plant, animal and bird species. Additionally individual trees that are specimens of a species.

## **CONCLUSION**

Staff recommends approval of Mandatory Referral No. 02202-MCPS-1. The proposal complies with the Forest Conservation Law and preserves significant and specimen trees in a designated highest priority forest stand in the down-county area.

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### **Attachments**

1. Vicinity Map
2. Site Plan for Proposed Athletic Field
3. Community Letters
4. Memorandum from Environmental Planning