



THE MARYLAND-NATIONAL CAPITAL PARK AND PLANNING COMMISSION

February 4, 2004

MEMORANDUM—MANDATORY REFERRAL

TO: Montgomery County Planning Board

VIA: John A. Carter, Chief, Community-Based Planning Division *WAC*
Khalid Afzal, Team Leader, Georgia Avenue Planning Team *KA*

FROM: Frederick Vernon Boyd, Community Planner *FVB*
Georgia Avenue Planning Team (301-495-4654)

SUBJECT: Mandatory Referral No. 03504-MCPS-1: Downcounty Consortium Middle School #9 (Belt Junior High School) 12701 Goodhill Road; Kensington-Wheaton Master Plan

STAFF RECOMMENDATION: Approval with the following comments to be transmitted to Montgomery County Public Schools:

1. A tree save plan prepared by a qualified professional must be submitted and approved by the M-NCPPC Environmental Planning staff;
2. The use of sustainable building materials on the interior renovation is encouraged in accordance with the guidelines of the U.S. Green Building Council on Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design (LEED).

PROJECT SUMMARY

Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) is proposing to reopen Col. Joseph A. Belt Junior High School in Wheaton as a public middle school. This school will be part of the Downcounty Consortium, which was created in 2000, and is designed to address expected space deficits at Parkland Middle School, which is currently the single middle school serving the Wheaton High School Cluster.

The school will house grades six through eight, and is designed for an initial capacity of 790 students. Core support spaces—cafeteria and kitchen areas, gymnasiums and locker rooms, administrative offices—in the school are designed to support 1,000 students. Should expansion of the student body be necessary, MCPS has identified an area that can accommodate an additional eight classrooms.

The property has been leased for the past several years by the Yeshiva of Greater Washington, which operates religious schools in its buildings. The Yeshiva schools are relocating to a former public school property in Montgomery Hills, which frees Belt for reopening as a public middle school.

THE SITE

Belt Junior High School is located in the Greenwood Knolls community in Wheaton, north and east of the intersection of Connecticut Avenue and Randolph Road. The site, which is bounded by Weller Road on the south, Goodhill Road on the west and Dean Road on the north and east, totals 20.26 acres. Weller Road Elementary School is immediately to the east on Weller Road. To the west, across Connecticut Avenue, is the community of Connecticut Avenue Park, and to the south and east are the neighborhoods of Glenmont Hills and Glenmont Village. The entire area is in the R-60 Zone.

The site is triangular and slopes north and west from Weller Road to the intersection of Dean and Goodhill Roads. It is largely open, with large mature trees along Weller and Goodhill roads as well as the northern portion of the site nearest the intersection of Dean and Goodhill roads. The school building is in the central portion of the site and can be reached from both Weller and Goodhill roads. Belt Junior High School was originally constructed in 1956. Classrooms were added in 1957 and 1961; auxiliary gymnasium space was added in 1962 and 1971. A small elevator addition was completed in 2001. The school buildings total a little more than 130,000 square feet on two floors.

Athletic fields are located north of the building along Dean Road and to the east next to the elementary school. There are four basketball courts between the playing fields on the east side of the property. South and west of the building is a parking area that can accommodate 105 cars.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The Yeshiva of Greater Washington undertook a number of physical improvements to the buildings under its lease arrangement, which reduces significantly the amount of work needed to reopen the school. Nearly all the exterior windows have been replaced and a new roof installed. More than 54,000 square feet of interior space will remain intact. Light renovation will be done on an additional approximately 39,000 square feet; in general, this work will entail removing or installing non-load bearing partitions to create appropriate classroom or laboratory space in sizes that meet current educational standards. Some parts of the school were not renovated by the Yeshiva; significant renovation will be done on about 36,000 square feet. Finally, a small amount—about 1,700 square feet—of new construction will be done to enclose circulation areas that are now outside.

The school's gymnasiums, locker rooms, dining and kitchen areas, mechanical systems and bathrooms will remain in their current locations. The new middle school will house one grade level group on the first floor and two on the second. Grade level groups include general classrooms, a special education classroom, and laboratories for computer-assisted study and science, as well as teacher planning and storage areas. Music and art classrooms are located on the second floor, along with a media center expanded to meet current educational criteria. The school's administrative center is located on the first floor.

RECENT ACTIVITY

Through the 1990s, several private schools considered leasing and occupying Belt Junior High School. One group, Nanaksar, which had taken a lease on the property in 1995, opened negotiations with the Yeshiva of Greater Washington in 1998 with the intent of subleasing the property to the Yeshiva. Nanaksar eventually defaulted on its lease in July 1998 and the County recaptured the property. The County decided to negotiate directly with the Yeshiva to lease the property, and the County Council approved a lease in November 1998. When it became clear that conditions at Parkland Middle School would require additional middle school capacity, MCPS decided to reopen Belt Junior High School. The Council approved modifications to the arrangement with the Yeshiva that enabled the Yeshiva to lease and move to the former Montgomery Hills Junior High School in Silver Spring and allow the County to reacquire the Belt property and transfer it to MCPS.

ANALYSIS

Master Plan

The recommendations of the 1989 Master Plan for the Communities of Kensington-Wheaton have been superceded by events. When the Plan was done, Belt had been closed for six years, and proposals had been made to reuse the site for low- and moderate-income housing for the elderly. Since the Master Plan was approved, MCPS has determined that the school is needed.

Environment

The Environmental Planning Unit of the Countywide Planning Division recommends approval of this mandatory referral, with the condition that a tree save plan prepared by a qualified professional be submitted and approved by the M-NCPPC Environmental Planning staff.

Environmental Guidelines – There are no stream valley or other environmental buffers on this site, and the site is not within a Primary Management or Special Protection area.

Stormwater Management – Full water quality and quantity control shall be expected to protect the integrity of the Joseph's Branch tributary of Rock Creek.

Forest Conservation – A Natural Resource Inventory/Forest Stand Delineation (NRI/FSD) has been approved for this application. An exemption to the Forest Conservation Law has been granted because the proposed project modifies an existing development, involves not more than 5,000 square feet of forest clearing, proposes no forest clearing within a stream buffer, is not on a property subject to Special Protection Area Water Quality Plan requirements and does not require a new subdivision plan.

Sustainable Building Design (Green Technology) – The staff encourages the use of sustainable building design in all public projects, in keeping with the work of the U.S. Green Building Council on Leadership in Energy & Environmental Design, or LEED. The focus of this project is on interior renovation, and the staff recognizes that the

project scope offers limited opportunities for LEED-related building design. As part of the renovation, MCPS may be able to incorporate building materials that employ sustainable or renewable technologies and, to the extent possible, MCPS is encouraged to pursue and implement use of such materials.

The plan is still subject to requirements for a tree save plan for any specimen trees. There are 11 specimen trees listed in good to excellent condition and 2 specimen trees in fair condition on the property. There are 22 significant trees on the property. The proposed basketball courts encroach on the critical root zones of trees numbered 8, 11, and 12 on the Natural Resources Inventory, a 36-inch Oak, a 27-inch Oak and a 24-inch Oak. The court proposed to be located closest to the school reduces the planting area available for the 36-inch Oak tree considerably. It also reduces the critical root zone of the 27-inch Oak tree by slightly more than one-third.

The Tree Save Plan shall show adequate protective measures for trees 8 and 12. These shall include, but not be limited to: shifting the location of the basketball courts, pre and post construction watering and fertilization, root pruning, and tree protection fence details.

TRANSPORTATION

The Transportation Planning Unit of the Countywide Planning Division has concluded that the proposed school meets the requirements of the Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance (APFO). A complete discussion of the staff's review is in their memorandum, which is attached.

A consultant retained by MCPS completed a traffic study to satisfy requirements of Local Area Transportation Review. The Transportation Planning Unit has reviewed that traffic study and has concluded that all affected intersections in the area will operate within the congestion standard (1,650 Critical Lane Volume) set for the Kensington-Wheaton Policy Area. Because a private school, which draws from a wider geographic area than a local public school, now occupies the site, current traffic patterns and distribution of trips do not provide an accurate picture of traffic movements at this location. The Trip Generation Manual of the Institute of Transportation Engineers was therefore used to estimate the trips generated by a 1,000-student public school. The accompanying memorandum details the impact of the school on affected intersections.

The Transportation Planning Unit also reviewed site access, circulation and pedestrian facilities. Four access points serve the site from Goodhill and Weller roads. Two entrances from Goodhill Road are devoted to an exclusive one-way bus loop that is separate from the drive aisles to be used by parents. This auto loop, which will also serve the school's parking lot, is one way, and uses one access point on Weller Road and a second on Goodhill Road. There are sidewalks on all streets serving the school and intersections include the necessary crosswalks. Nearby intersections with traffic signals include pedestrian controls for safe crossings.

The school site is in the Kensington-Wheaton Policy Area, which has a remaining capacity of 2,770 jobs and 2,530 housing units as of December 31, 2003.

PUBLIC CONSULTATION

Montgomery County Public Schools convened a facilities advisory committee to review schematic designs for the project. The committee included representatives from adjoining communities. It met four times in the spring of 2003, with one of the meetings designated a community meeting for the project. Issues discussed at the community meeting included insuring security of the recreation facilities along Dean Road, which are located in an area regularly used by pedestrians walking to bus stops along Weller Road. The courts are not lit at night; MCPS design and security staffs continue to pursue solutions to this issue. Other residents raised concerns about the ongoing health of trees in the northern portion of the site, which can be addressed in part by the tree save plan that is a condition of approving the mandatory referral.

Five civic associations in the vicinity of Belt Junior High School were notified in writing of this mandatory referral hearing. No comments have been received to date.

CONCLUSION

The proposed project meets the applicable standards and guidelines for the environment and it meets applicable guidelines for adequate public facilities. A public school is consistent with the Kensington-Wheaton Master Plan. The Department recommends approval of this mandatory referral and transmittal of the comments.

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Attachments