

**TO:** Planning Commission Members

**FROM:** Andrea Campisi, Senior Planner, Building and Planning Department

**SUBJECT:** TENTATIVE SKETCH PLAN – 1800 W. Montgomery Avenue & 1835 County Line Road, Lower Merion School District Athletic Fields, Villanova, LD# 3833, Ward 6

**DATE:** September 6, 2019

### Proposal

The applicant, Robert Copeland, Superintendent of the Lower Merion School District, is seeking Tentative Sketch Plan approval for the following:

- Construction of 52 surface parking spaces;
- Creation of six, multi-purpose athletic fields;
- Adaptive reuse of the existing single-family dwelling and pool house located at 1835 County Line Road for School District purposes such as a student art gallery or meeting space for District organizations.
- Demolition of all improvements on 1800 W. Montgomery Avenue including the existing single-family dwelling, detached garage and the garden walls and outbuildings; and
- Installation of three stormwater management systems.

The improvements are proposed to be accessed via driveways from County Line Road and Stone Ridge Lane.

The proposal is illustrated on the attached three sheet plan set dated April 15, 2019, last revised August 23, 2019 prepared by Chester Valley Engineers, Inc. The following additional documents were also submitted:

- Historic Resource Impact Study prepared by Commonwealth Heritage Group, dated August 2019; and
- Wetland delineation report prepared by GHD Services, Inc. dated February 1, 2019.



### Property History

The properties that are the subject of this application are located in the R1 zoning district. Both properties were originally part of the Stoneleigh estate, and constructed during the ownership of Samuel T. Bodine. The Tudor mansion at **1835 County Line Road**, called “Oakwell,” was built ca. 1922 from a design by architect William Wayne, Jr. It was the home of Samuel’s son William W. Bodine. As with the rest of the Bodine family estate, the landscaping around the mansion was designed by Olmsted Brothers. One freestanding garden structure, called the “tea house” on historic landscape plans, ended up on the 1835 County Line Road property when the estate was subdivided.



*1835 County Line Road Dwelling*

**1800 West Montgomery Avenue** contains structures relating to Stoneleigh’s agricultural operations. The group of buildings, walls, and other elements were designed by Frank Miles Day & Brother to fit within the larger landscape plan designed by Olmsted Brothers. The intact elements of the property include the superintendent’s cottage, various brick walls, and a group of small buildings associated with the operations of the greenhouse. A majority of the footprint of the former greenhouse has been replaced by a tennis court, though a small portion of an original greenhouse remains. The property is a good example of the architecture of Frank Miles Day, whose work includes three Class II-designated resources on the Township’s Historic Resource Inventory and a wide variety of notable buildings in the Philadelphia area. When new, the garden complex was considered significant enough to merit a five-page article in a 1903 issue of “House and Garden” magazine. The article described the architecture glowingly: “That [utilitarian] buildings can be made objects of beauty and also an attraction of the estate is shown... Here is an ingenious grouping of not only the greenhouses themselves, but of all their accompaniments, including the horses and teams engaged upon the garden work. All of this is enclosed within distinctly defined boundaries to which are added details of a charming architectural character.”



*1800 W. Montgomery Avenue: Historic photo of the greenhouse complex*



*1800 W. Montgomery: Current photo of the greenhouse complex*

### **Property Description**

**1835 County Line Road:** The property contains 10.4 acres and has frontage on County Line Road. The property contains a single family dwelling, a driveway, a pool house, a pool and a shed. The main house on the property is listed as a Class II resource on the Township’s Historic Resource Inventory. The pool house is noncontributing and was constructed in approximately 2012. The property also contains an area of existing wetlands adjacent to County Line Road.

**1800 W. Montgomery Avenue:** The property contains 132,422 sq. ft. Although addressed off Montgomery Avenue, the site does not have any frontage on Montgomery Avenue. It has vehicular access to Montgomery Avenue via an existing driveway that is shared with 330 Spring Mill Road, Stoneleigh. The driveway is owned by Natural Lands.

### **Purpose of Tentative Sketch Plan**

The purpose of a Tentative Sketch Plan is to determine appropriate locations for buildings, driveways, parking areas and other improvements and how such improvements can be situated to have the least impact on a site’s natural features. It has become practice in the Township to use the Tentative Sketch Plan phase to flesh out other issues and give applicants a program to address at the Preliminary Plan phase.

### **Consistency with the Comprehensive Plan**

The following recommendations were included in the [Community Facilities Element of the Township’s Comprehensive Plan](#). The applicant should continue to work with the Township to further these recommendations:

- F21 – Establish an intergovernmental structure to coordinate long range planning between the Lower Merion School District and Lower Merion Township.

- F21.a – Establish a schedule of regular town meetings to publicly discuss issues common to both LMSD and Lower Merion Township. The meetings should be co-hosted by representatives of LMSD and Lower Merion Township.
- F21.b – Work with the LMSD to understand land use implications resulting from public school facility needs. Develop options permitting public schools to evolve to meet the community’s needs while balancing larger municipal needs as well as land use concerns of neighbors resulting from expanded public school facilities. Evaluate current public school Zoning Code provisions against various future enrollment scenarios.
- F22 – Continue working with LMSD on joint planning, development, use and maintenance of ball fields and game courts by Township residents.

## Zoning

The current Zoning Code does not contain institutional zoning districts for schools. Public school uses are regulated under provisions in the RAA district ([155-11.E](#)) which regulates lot area, lot width, building area, impervious surface, setbacks, building height, parking and buffer requirements. On November 19, 2018, the Board of Commissioners adopted Ordinance 4148 which amended Section [155-11.E](#) as noted below.

The following table details the bulk, area and setback requirements for the existing and proposed conditions:

| <b>R1 Zoning Requirements</b>      | <b>Required</b>         | <b>Proposed</b>                 |
|------------------------------------|-------------------------|---------------------------------|
| <b>Minimum Net Lot Area</b>        | 30,000 min.             | 581,905 sq. ft.<br>(13.4 acres) |
| <b>Minimum Lot Width</b>           | 125’ min.               | 448’                            |
| <b>Maximum Building Area</b>       | 15%<br>(87,285 sq. ft.) | 1.5%<br>(8,636 sq. ft.)         |
| <b>Minimum Front Yard Set back</b> | 50’                     | 50’                             |
| <b>Minimum Side Yard Set back</b>  | 25’ & 25’               | 25’ & 25’*                      |
| <b>Minimum Rear Yard Set back</b>  | 25’                     | 25’                             |
| <b>Maximum Impervious Surface</b>  | 21%                     | 10.4%<br>(60,353 sq. ft.)       |
| <b>Maximum Building Height</b>     | 35’                     | No new buildings proposed       |
| <b>Parking</b>                     | 11**                    | 52                              |
| <b>Buffer</b>                      | 10’                     | None Provided                   |

\*There are multiple side yards, all of which include a 25’ setback.

\*\*Eleven parking spaces are required for the athletic fields.

## Historical Commission

The application is scheduled for review by the Historical Commission at their meeting on [September 23, 2019](#).

The Historical Commission reviewed and tabled the application at their [June 24, 2019](#) meeting. Representatives of the Lower Merion School District appeared at that meeting seeking approval to redevelop the site and requested to not provide a Historic Resource Impact Study. The Commission did not support the applicant’s request so that it may review the application with a full understanding of the historical context as it relates to the buildings, structures, and objects, and also to the impact that alterations to the landscape and/or buildings and structures may have on adjacent historic resources.



## Environmental Advisory Council (EAC)

The EAC reviewed the plan at their June 25, 2019 meeting and recommended the applicant be particularly sensitive around the wetland area to ensure that their proposal does not result in drying up of the wetland.

## Montgomery County Planning Commission Review

The County review letter is attached. The County recommendations have been either addressed on the attached plan or have been incorporated into the issues below as well as the recommended conditions of approval.

## Issues

### 1. Procedural Issue

As noted above, the applicant is scheduled to appear before the Historical Commission on [September 23, 2019](#). Unfortunately the Historical Commission meeting occurs after the September Board of Commissioners meeting. Therefore, should the Board of Commissioners wish to include recommendations made by the Historical Commission into the conditions of approval of the Tentative Sketch Plan, they will be unable to do so. Therefore, the application requires relief from Subdivision and Land Development Code Section [135-7.C.1](#), which requires the Historical Commission to review the plans and submit their comments as part of the Tentative Sketch Plan process.

### 2. Overall Site Design

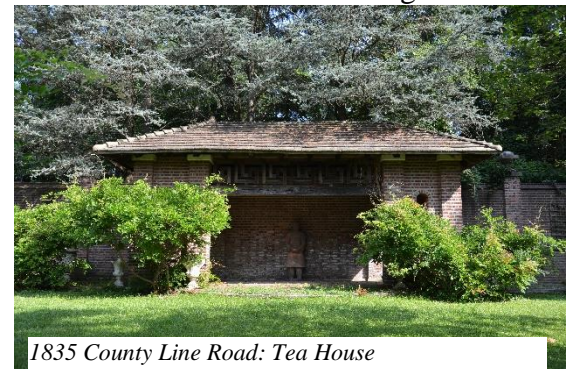
Evaluating the impacts to natural features and the surrounding neighborhood are key components of the Tentative Sketch Plan phase. Another primary focus of the Tentative Sketch Plan review should be setting up a program for the Preliminary Plan to ensure that the edges of the property are designed to mitigate off-site externalities on the surrounding neighborhood through landscaping and fencing. The landscaped edges of the property should be designed as a naturalized ecosystem.

Given the fact that the property contains many large trees, wetlands and historically significant elements, the applicant must pay extra attention to minimizing impacts to these features. In addition, provisions for potential future expansions to integrate the campus with the nearby middle school site should be considered. In furtherance of that, the applicant submitted a pedestrian connectivity study with the Preliminary Plan application for the middle school. Specific recommendations related to the site design are included below.

- **Alternative Site Layouts to Enhance Open Space and Preserve Historic Elements**

While none of the buildings or elements on 1800 W. Montgomery Avenue are on the Historic Resource Inventory, they are nonetheless historically significant and warrant protection. Members of Township staff, the Lower Merion Conservancy and the Historical Commission have been working to devise alternative layouts for the fields that would preserve some of the historically significant elements on 1800 W. Montgomery Avenue including the former brick greenhouse related structures and the walls that connect them.

In addition, while the main house on 1835 County Line Road is being preserved, the tea house, which is a small brick open roofed structure surrounded by garden walls, is shown to be



1835 County Line Road: Tea House

removed. Since the building itself is not in the way of the baseball field, it may be possible to preserve it. Staff has included this as a condition of approval.

- **Bus Access to the Site**

The applicant proposes to provide bus access into the site from Stone Ridge Lane, which currently dead ends into 1835 County Line Road. Currently there is no vehicular access from Stone Ridge Lane into the site. Although the applicant indicates that a small number of buses will visit the site on a daily basis, those buses will have to travel through the adjoining residential neighborhood. In order to minimize disturbances to the neighborhood, staff and the Township Engineer recommend the applicant revise the site layout to eliminate vehicular access from Stone Ridge Lane. Eliminating the vehicular entrance from Stone Ridge Lane would also require a bus turnaround that, per the Fire Marshall, would also be necessary for fire trucks and other emergency vehicles that may need to access the site.

- **Parking Layout**

The Zoning Officer has reviewed the proposed parking count and determined that since the use of the existing house and pool house to remain has yet to be determined, the final parking count can not be calculated.

Staff, including the Township Engineer, supports the Montgomery County Planning Commission's recommendation to connect the two proposed surface parking lots to eliminate the dead end nature of the lots as proposed.

- **Relationship to New Middle School**

The field complex is being developed in conjunction with the new middle school located at 1860 W. Montgomery Avenue. The new middle school received Tentative Sketch Plan approval in May 2019. A condition of that approval (provided below) requires the School District to participate in a working group of Township staff and neighbors to identify and consider issues, such as circulation and access, related to the establishment of a large scale community facility in an established residential neighborhood. The working group has been established and met for the first time over the summer.

*The applicant shall meet with a working group consisting of Township staff and members of the neighboring community to develop and implement measures to address construction impacts, pedestrian access, parking, pick-up/drop-off of students, bus access to the site and traffic calming on nearby streets. The working group should be convened upon approval of this application. The applicant shall also communicate on a regular basis with this group to keep them up to date on the status of the demolition and construction project.*

The construction of the fields has been included in the working group discussions to improve functional integration between the sites, minimize circulation issues and enhance community benefit.

### **3. Impacts to Wetlands**

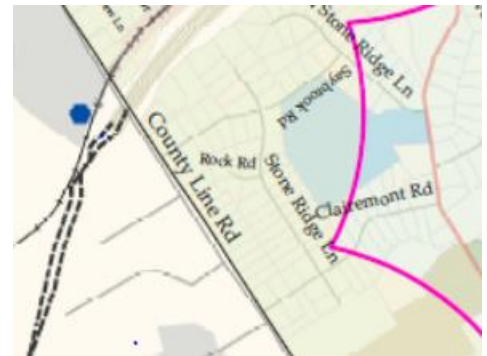
As noted above, there are wetlands on the site adjacent to County Line Road. The wetlands are not stream fed but are likely fed by surface water runoff. The wetlands straddle the shared boundary line with the adjacent Stoneleigh property. At its closest point, the proposed runoff area associated with the practice soccer field is

within six feet of the wetlands. The applicant must demonstrate at Preliminary Plan how they will minimize grading so as to not negatively impact the wetlands. The EAC recommended that the applicant ensure that this proposal does not negatively impact the amount of surface runoff entering the wetlands. They also recommended that the applicant consider restoring the wetlands, to the extent necessary.

#### 4. Pedestrian Circulation/Sidewalks

- **Sidewalks**

The property has frontage on County Line Road and Stone Ridge Lane. The site is also located in close proximity of the Norristown High Speed Line (NHSL) station as shown on the Prioritized Pedestrian Improvement Map of the Comprehensive Plan. The NHSL is a train that runs between the 69th Street Transportation Center in Upper Darby and the Norristown Transportation Center in Norristown. Therefore, it is important to provide safe pedestrian access to the site from as many points as possible.



Subdivision and Land Development Code Section [135-28](#) states “Sidewalks shall be provided along heavily traveled streets and at any location where the Board of Commissioners shall determine that sidewalks are necessary for public safety or convenience. All sidewalks shall be a minimum of five feet wide, except as otherwise provided in Chapter 155, Zoning.”

Although the applicant seeks relief to not provide a sidewalk along County Line Road, the Code requires it to be installed as it is a heavily traveled street. Staff advocates for the installation of the sidewalk as it could lead to other sidewalk connections in the future. A sidewalk or another path could be installed along Stone Ridge Lane to facilitate pedestrian access from the fields to the proposed middle school as it will ‘enhance public safety and convenience’ into the site.

Should the Board of Commissioners determine that the sidewalks are not warranted at this time, staff recommends a condition of approval be included requiring a five-foot-wide sidewalk to be installed along the frontage of the property at such time as required by the Board of Commissioners.

- **Connections to Nearby School Properties**

In May 2019, the Board of Commissioners approved a Tentative Sketch Plan for the proposed middle school at 1860 W. Montgomery Avenue. The proposed athletic fields on this site will serve that school. Unfortunately, the sites are not directly adjacent to one another and sidewalks do not exist in the surrounding residential neighborhood, making walking between the sites difficult for students. The pedestrian circulation between the two campuses and neighborhood will require full coordination between the School District and the Township. Staff recommends the applicant work with the Township to connect the proposed fields to all existing public land uses via a pedestrian circulation/master plan.

#### 5. Traffic Impacts

The Township Engineer reviewed the traffic impact study and noted that it did not address traffic associated with the fields after normal school hours. The trip generation for the PM peak traffic hours must be investigated in a revised study to be submitted with the Preliminary Plan. Also, traffic impacts at the intersection of County Line and Spring Mill Roads and to the site driveways must be performed for the peak

PM traffic hours. In addition, since School District policy allows use of their fields by third parties, the use of the fields by third parties or special events should also be investigated in the traffic impact study.

## **6. Landscape Plan/Impacts to Mature Trees**

Staff and some members of the Planning Commission visited the site over the summer. The property contains numerous mature trees that have been well maintained over the years. The owners of 1835 County Line Road have essentially created an arboretum on their property as it contains a variety of both native and non-native specimen trees.

The attached plan has been updated to show the locations of all existing trees on the site that are at least six inches in caliper and greater as required by the Code. Both lots meet the definition of wooded lot per the Zoning Code which is defined as any building lot having more than one viable tree with a caliper of six inches or greater per 1,500 square feet of lot area. Zoning Code Section 155-167.7.B requires a developer that removes more than 25% of the existing trees on a wooded lot to replace those trees with new trees having a caliper of at least four inches.

Of the 691 trees that exist on the site, approximately 462 trees are proposed to be removed to construct the proposed improvements. This results in a requirement for the applicant to provide 290, four-inch caliper replacement trees. In staff's determination, the site cannot accommodate this amount of trees. If the replacement trees cannot be provided, the applicant will have to seek a variance from the Zoning Hearing Board.

Specific recommendations to preserve and protect some of the specimen quality trees include the applicant working with staff to preserve and minimize impacts to the 48 inch and 50 inch *Quercus alba* trees located to the southeast of the main house on 1835 County Line Road by shifting the parking spaces out of the driplines of the trees.

In addition, staff believes that several existing trees could be transplanted and incorporated into the final landscape design of the site including:

- Five existing *Fagus sylvatica* 'Pendula' trees
- Three existing *Japanese Maple* trees
- One existing *Tsuga canadensis* 'Pendula' tree
- One existing *Cedrus atlantica* 'Glaucia Pendula' tree
- One existing *Picea abies* 'Pendula' tree

The applicant should also coordinate with Natural Lands Trust and other local nonprofits to allow the organizations to transplant trees, shrubs and other herbaceous material from the site before construction commences.

Further, Zoning Code Section 155-11.E.8 states:

*A minimum ten-foot planted buffer shall be required along the side and rear property lines when a public school property abuts a residential zoning district. A maximum six-foot-tall wall may be placed at the edge of the buffer a minimum of 10 feet from the property line. If a second wall is installed in a required side or rear yard setback, an additional ten-foot planted buffer shall be installed, and the wall shall be located a minimum of 20 feet from the property line.*

Since the property abuts residential zoning districts on all sides, a minimum 10 foot buffer is required but is not shown on the plan. The Preliminary Plan should clearly show the required buffer. The applicant should also advise what will happen to existing fencing along the property lines.

## **7. Relief**

The applicant requests relief from the following Code Sections:

1. Subdivision & Land Development Code Section 135-28.A, to not provide a sidewalk along County Line Road.
2. Subdivision and Land Development Code Section 135-7.C.1, to not obtain Historical Commission review comments as part of the Tentative Sketch Plan review.
3. If and to the extent required, partial relief from Natural Features Conservation Code Section 101-5C.2.a, to disturb slopes exceeding 15%.
4. If and to the extent required, partial relief from Natural Features Conservation Code Section 101-5C.2.b, to disturb slopes exceeding 25%.

## **8. Action**

The Planning Commission must take the following action for this application:

- a. Provide a recommendation on the Tentative Sketch Plan.
- b. Provide a recommendation on the requested relief.