

November 8, 2019

TO: Planning Commission Members

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

SUBJECT: TENTATIVE SKETCH PLAN – 6 Bala Avenue & 23 W. City Avenue, The French International School, Bala Cynwyd, LD# 3837, Ward 9

Proposal

The applicant, Kathy Kotchick, is seeking Tentative Sketch Plan approval on behalf of The French International School for the following:

- Consolidation of the two properties;
- Construction of a one-story detached building with a 4,780 sq. ft. footprint on 23 W. City Avenue behind the existing school building on a former parking area;
- Renovation of and the construction of a two-story addition onto the existing residence on 6 Bala Avenue with a 585 sq. ft. footprint to provide classroom and office space;
- Construction of nine new parking spaces, including two ADA spaces;
- Relocation of 25 existing parking spaces from 23 W. City Avenue to 6 Bala Avenue;
- Construction of a hard-surfaced play area between the existing and proposed building on 23 W. City Avenue;
- Extension of the existing driveway on W. City Avenue to connect to 6 Bala Avenue and an expanded entrance and exit driveway from 6 Bala Avenue onto Bala Avenue;
- Conversion of the existing driveway into the site from W. City Avenue to one-way circulation;
- Preservation of the existing building at 6 Bala Avenue for use as classroom and office space,
- Replacement of the existing sidewalk along W. City Avenue with a new eight foot wide sidewalk and a four foot wide verge;
- Replacement of the existing sidewalk along Bala Avenue with a new five foot wide sidewalk;
- Creation of an informal grass play area to the rear of the 6 Bala Avenue property; and
- Installation of two underground stormwater management areas.

In addition to these physical improvements, the applicant proposes to increase the maximum permitted enrollment from 150 to 175 students and to increase the number of full-time equivalent staff for the upper school from 11 to 18. The largest area of public assembly will also increase from 40 seats to 85 seats.

The proposal is illustrated on the attached nine sheet plan set dated June 13, 2019, last revised October 18, 2019, prepared by Site Engineering Concepts, LLC. A Transportation Impact Assessment prepared by McMahon Associates, Inc. dated June 13, 2019 was also submitted.



Property Descriptions

The properties that are the subject of this application are described below.

- **23 W. City Avenue, Bala Cynwyd:** The property is zoned CAD/Bala Village, contains 28,833 sq. ft. and has driveway access to W. City Avenue. It is currently improved with a building that has an 8,367 sq. ft. footprint and a 29 space parking lot.
- **6 Bala Avenue, Bala Cynwyd:** The property is split zoned R6A/R4, contains 35,000 sq. ft. and has driveway access to Bala Avenue. It is currently improved with a two and a half story stone house with an 1,829 sq. ft. footprint, which is listed as a [Class II historic resource](#) and was constructed between 1881 and 1887.

Project Background

The French International School is a multicultural, dual-language school for pre-K through eighth grade that has operated in Lower Merion Township since 1991 at various locations. The School currently has two locations. Pre-K through 3rd grades are located in the Lower School at 150 Highland Avenue in Bala Cynwyd and 4th through 8th grades are located at the Upper School on 23 W. City Avenue. The 23 W. City Avenue location currently has a total of 107 students and eight full time and five part time faculty/staff.

Purpose of Tentative Sketch Plan

The purpose of a Tentative Sketch Plan is to determine appropriate locations for buildings, driveways and parking areas and how such improvements can least impact 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 proposal demonstrates consistency with the following [Comprehensive Plan](#) objectives and recommendations:

- [Community Development Objective](#): Maintain the vitality and diversity of private institutions while balancing their needs with those of the surrounding neighborhoods.
- [LI6](#): Manage the external impacts of activities occurring on institutional properties, particularly when the frequency and/or intensity of use is proposed to increase. Develop general policies, clear guidelines and specific requirements of controlling the increased use by outside groups such as other public or private institutions or camps.
- [LI3](#): Review and refine special exception standards governing small-scale institutional uses under five acres in size to ensure that future growth is compatible with its surroundings.

Zoning Hearing Board (ZHB)

As noted above, the applicant proposes to increase enrollment from 150 to 175 students, to increase the number of full-time staff from 11 to 18 and increase the largest area of public assembly from 40 seats to 85 seats.

On September 19, 2019 the ZHB granted special exceptions under [155-11.S\(2\)](#) and [155-11.X](#) to expand the educational use on the property at 23 W. City Avenue to include the property at 6 Bala Avenue. The ZHB also granted a special exception under [155-8.A](#), to extend the R6A zoning district 100 feet beyond the R4 district boundary. The ZHB also waived 50% of the required parking (eight of 17 spaces). The relief was conditioned on:

1. The applicant providing and maintaining a student drop-off and pick-up management plan satisfactory to Township staff to mitigate the potential for vehicle back-up onto City Avenue;
2. There being no lighting on the 6 Bala Avenue play area;
3. There being no loudspeakers or outside amplified sound systems; and

4. No sports competitions (other than ad hoc play that students engage in at recess, or before and after school) taking place on the property.

The ZHB Decision is attached.

Historical Commission

Representatives of the French International School appeared before the Historical Commission on [September 23, 2019](#). The Historical Commission had the following comments/recommendations:

- Conceptual approval of the new construction, with low impact to the historic resource based on the design, material palette, massing and location of new construction. The applicant will return with architectural details.
- Conceptual approval of the addition to the historic resource finding that the massing, location, volume, and setbacks from the historic resource, as well as the material palette that is consistent with the new construction and harmonious with the adjacent historic resource, is appropriate. In addition, if the driveway can be narrowed, the bay window can be saved. The Commission supports the retention of this significant character-defining architectural feature that mitigates the large scale of the addition.

Environmental Advisory Council (EAC)

The EAC reviewed the plan at their October 22, 2019 meeting and stated that the landscape plan includes many natives and seems to address buffer issues. The EAC stated that site sections would be useful in the next round of review.

Montgomery County Planning Commission Review

The County review letter is attached. The County's review included comments related to:

- Compliance with greening standards
- Development Design Standards
- Sidewalk width and location
- Vehicular circulation
- Stormwater management

The comments have either been either addressed on the attached plan or have been incorporated into the issues below as well as the recommended conditions of approval.

Zoning

The following table detail the bulk, area and setback requirements for the existing and proposed conditions. As the lot is split zoned R4/R6A/CAD-BV, the impervious and building area requirements reflect blended amounts.

	R4 Required	R6A Required	Proposed	CAD-BV Zoning	
				Required	Proposed
Minimum Net Lot Area (sq. ft.)	6,000	5,000	35,000	n/a	28,833
Minimum Lot Width (ft.)	65'	60'	100	n/a	123
Minimum Front Yard	30'		40'	n/a	n/a
Build to Line	n/a		47'	20'- 25'	25'
Minimum Side Yard	8' min & 20' agg.		16'*	10'- 25'	1.1'*
Minimum Rear Yard	25'		36'	25'	n/a
Maximum Building Height	35'	65'	35'	<65'	20'
Parking Spaces**	25		25	25	25

*Existing non-conformity.

**Per Zoning Hearing Board Decision

	Required*	Proposed
Maximum Building Area	39.3%	23.8%
Maximum Impervious Surface**	61.7%	61.5%

*Blended Requirement

**Includes [155-141.5.B](#)

Issues

1. Parking

At the ZHB the applicant testified that they do not have a great need for parking, as they have a small faculty and many of them utilize public transportation or access the site via bicycle. The expansion generates the requirement for 17 parking spaces. The ZHB waived 50% of the required parking spaces (eight of 17 spaces). The applicant stated at the ZHB hearing that they planned to seek Conditional Use under [Zoning Code Section 155-95.1](#) to hold the remaining nine spaces in reserve so that the paved area could be used as a hard surface sports court. Following the ZHB decision the applicant decided not to seek Conditional Use approval and instead revised the plan to show parking where the sports court was previously shown.

Staff urges the applicant to further consider seeking Conditional Use to hold the nine parking spaces in reserve in conjunction with the Preliminary Plan application given that they testified that the spaces are not needed. Providing a hard surface outdoor play area creates a more balanced site for an educational use. Staff has also included a condition requiring bike racks to be provided on the site.

2. Landscape Plan

While a Landscape Plan is not required at this stage, the applicant provided a schematic landscape plan. Staff recommends that the applicant provide appropriate buffer plantings to mitigate visual impacts of the use on adjacent residential properties. The landscape plan should also include a streetscape treatment that is well-defined and welcoming on both City Avenue and Bala Avenue. Staff notes that the greening standards contained in Subdivision and Land Development Code Section [135-41.4](#) are required along the City Avenue property frontage.

3. Stormwater Management

According to the Township Engineer, there are severe stormwater issues downgrade of the applicant's properties on the west side. As a result, he is requesting that the runoff volume from 23 W. City Avenue, which flows in that direction, be recharged for the 100 year storm.

4. Traffic Impacts

The Township Engineer has reviewed the applicant's traffic study and recommends the applicant investigate adding striping to create a left turn lane for use at the proposed Bala Avenue entrance to improve the efficiency of vehicles accessing that driveway.

5. Internal Walkway & Historic Bay Window

The plan shows a 22 foot wide drive aisle extending from Bala Avenue. The applicant acknowledges that installing a driveway this wide requires the removal of an existing bay window on the historic structure as its retention would result in the narrowing of the proposed walkway to 1.4 feet, which is not ADA compliant. As noted above, the Historical Commission supports the retention of this character-defining architectural feature as it mitigates the large scale of the addition. The Commission also supports the narrowing of the driveway to achieve this. In response, the applicant provided an alternate plan (Sheet 4) showing a 20 foot wide drive aisle.

The Township Engineer notes that the alternate plan does not provide the standard aisle width required for two-way, ninety (90°) degree parking stalls and requested that the width of the driveway between the window and the curb cut at Bala Avenue be increased in width to 22 feet wide. Staff has included a condition requiring the applicant to revise the plan to widen the driveway.

6. Relief

The plan shows portions of the walkways and driveway to be constructed in slopes exceeding twenty-five (25%) percent along City Avenue. [Natural Features Code Section 101.5.C](#) prohibits site disturbance on slopes 25% and greater. Although the applicant has not applied for this relief, it is required. The applicant has not provided documentation but the Township Engineer stated that the slopes are very likely man-made and supports the relief. Staff has included a condition requiring steep slopes to be shaded on the plan and a legend added.

The applicant also seeks relief to not provide the required Historic Resource Impact Study per [Subdivision and Land Development Code Section 135-16.B.17](#)

7. Action

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

1. Provide a recommendation on the
 - a. Tentative Sketch Plan.
 - b. Relief from [Natural Features Code Section 101.5.C](#) to permit disturbance to slopes greater than 25%.
 - c. Relief from [Subdivision and Land Development Code Section 135-16.B.17](#), to not provide a Historic Resource Impact Study.