

February 27, 2020

TO: Planning Commission Members

FROM: Jillian Dierks, Planner, Building and Planning Department

SUBJECT: PRELIMINARY LAND DEVELOPMENT 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 Preliminary Land Development 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 4,484 sq. ft. footprint on 23 W. City Avenue behind the existing school building on a former parking area;
- Preservation of the existing building at 6 Bala Avenue for use as classroom and office space and construction of a two-story addition with a 605 sq. ft footprint;
- Construction of 34 parking spaces, including two ADA spaces;
- 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;
- Restriping of Bala Avenue in the vicinity of the site to create a space for a left turn lane into the Bala Avenue driveway of the development;
- Replacement of the existing sidewalk along W. City Avenue with a new six-foot-wide sidewalk and a four-foot-wide hardscape 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 18 sheet plan set dated June 13, 2019, last revised February 14, 2020 prepared by Site Engineering Concepts, LLC. Also submitted were architectural renderings prepared by SMP Architects, dated January 6, 2020 and a landscape plan prepared by Viridian Landscape Studio, dated January 6, 2020, last revised February 14, 2020.



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.

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 (Appeal # 4468) 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.

On January 23, 2020 the ZHB granted a variance (Appeal #4484) from the requirement in Zoning Code Section 155-219.F.4.e.2 to not provide an unobscured walkway width of eight feet and a four foot wide paved strip and to instead install a six foot wide walkway with a four foot wide strip along the City Avenue frontage of 23 W. City Avenue.

Both ZHB decisions can be found at the below link which will be active for 30 days following the date of this memo: <https://app.sharebase.com/#/folder/12727/share/166-ULz--Eugqan6LcxLpiWeXAQMI318>

Historical Commission (HC)

On [January 27, 2020](#), the HC recommended approval of the application, finding that the new construction and addition to the historic resource would have minimal impact upon the historic resource, and that it is sympathetic to the historic character, materials and details of the resource.

Environmental Advisory Council (EAC)

The EAC reviewed the plan at their October 22, 2019 and February 25, 2020 meetings and stated that the landscape plan includes many natives and seems to address buffer issues. The EAC asked the applicant to continue encourage children to take the bus to reduce single occupancy vehicle drop off and consider installation of electric vehicle charging facilities.

Montgomery County Planning Commission Review

The County review letter is attached. The comments have either been 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 details 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	R6A	CAD-BV Zoning	
	Required		Required	Proposed
Minimum Net Lot Area (sq. ft.)	6,000	5,000	n/a	63,833
Minimum Lot Width (ft.)	65'	60'	n/a	223'
Minimum Front Yard	30'		n/a	n/a
Build to Line	n/a		20' - 25'	25'
Minimum Side Yard	8' min & 20' agg.		10' - 25'	1.1'*
Minimum Rear Yard	25'		25'	226'
Maximum Building Height	35'	65'	<65'	35'
Parking Spaces**	25		25	34

*Existing non-conformity.

**Per Zoning Hearing Board Decision

	Permitted*	Proposed
Maximum Building Area	39.3%	23% 14,918 sq. ft.
Maximum Impervious Surface**	61.7% 39,382 sq. ft.	60.7% 38,797 sq. ft. (585 sq. ft. remaining)

*Blended Requirement

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

Staff has not identified any issues with this plan.

Relief

With the Tentative Sketch Plan approval the applicant was granted Relief from [Natural Features Code Section 101.5.C](#) to permit disturbance to slopes greater than 25%.

Action

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

1. Provide a recommendation on the Preliminary Land Development Plan.