

Meeting Date: July 28, 2025

**TO:** Lower Merion Township Planning Commission Members

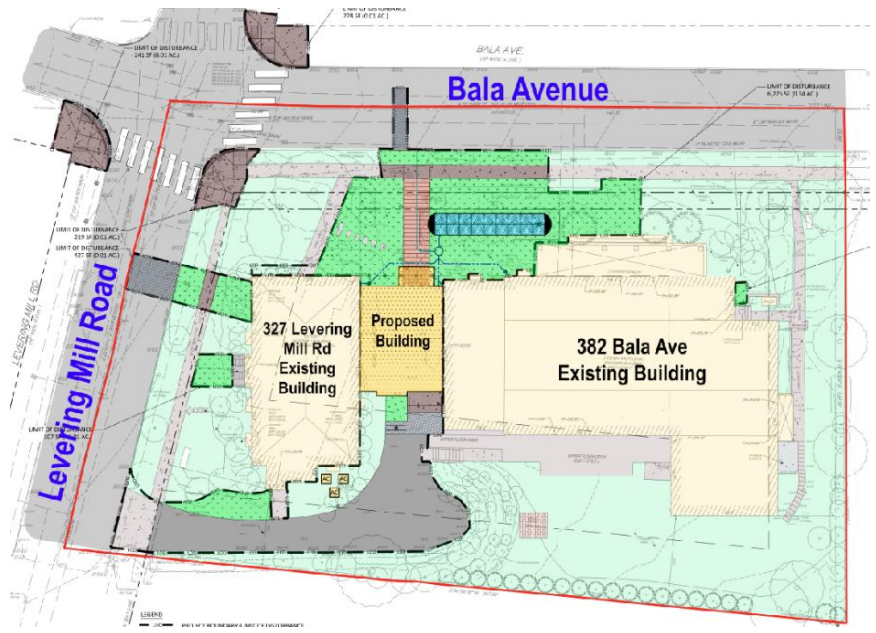
**FROM:** Department of Building and Planning – Holly Colello, Planner & Colleen Hall, Senior Planner

**SUBJECT:** Preliminary Land Development Plan – 382 Bala Avenue & 327 Levering Mill Road, Gratz College, Bala Cynwyd, Ward 13, LD# 3928PP

**PROPOSAL:**

Zev Eleff, President of Gratz College the applicant is seeking Preliminary Land Development Plan approval for the following:

1. Consolidation of 382 Bala Avenue and 327 Levering Mill Road into one parcel.
2. Construction of a two-story 860 sq. ft. footprint glass atrium connecting the existing Hall and Library buildings at both the upper and lower levels. One level at grade and one immediately below grade. The atrium will serve as a centralized, staffed entrance for both buildings. The applicant has stated that the improvement is not intended to increase capacity or occupancy, or use of the buildings on the property.
3. Exterior & interior renovations of the two (2) existing buildings.
4. Installation of pedestrian hardscaping. This will consist of pathways linking the atrium entrance to Bala Avenue to the north and connecting to the existing driveway from Levering Mill Road to the southeast.



**RELIEF REQUEST:**

- From SALDO Code §135-3.4 – To not submit a Tentative Sketch Land Development Plan application.

**SUBMISSION MATERIALS:**

The proposal is illustrated on the attached set of plans that include:

- **Civil:** Twenty-three (21) sheets prepared by Meliora Design dated May 30, 2025, last revised July 11, 2025.
- **Landscape Submission:** Three (3) sheets prepared by Viridian Landscape Studio dated May 30, 2025, last revised July 11, 2025.
- **Architectural Submission:** Three (3) sheets prepared by OZ Collaborative dated March 25, 2024, last revised July 11, 2025.
  - A traffic impact study was not required per [SALDO Code §135-8.2.C.1.e](#), as the proposed development does not exceed the threshold which states any new land development or addition of 4,000 sq. ft. or more gross floor area to existing use shall provide a traffic study.

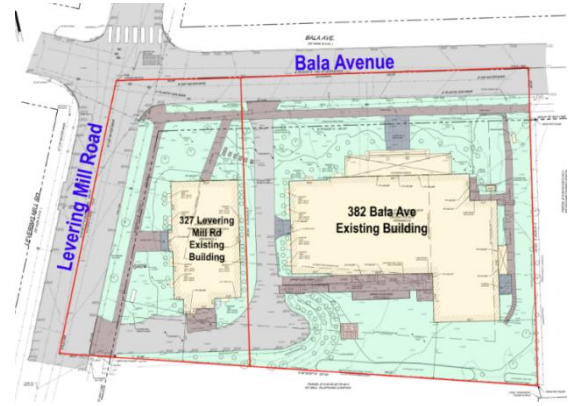
## HISTORIC SIGNIFICANCE / EXISTING CONDITIONS / PROPERTY HISTORY:

### Historic Resources in the Township

382 Bala Avenue and 327 Levering Mill Road, consist of two parcels, with both buildings designated as **Class II** Historic Resources under the [Code §A180-1A](#). Lower Merion classifies historic resources as Class I or Class II based on significance.

- **Class I** properties meet at least three criteria—one from Category B (e.g., association with significant people/events, architectural merit, or archaeological value)—and often include National Register sites or certified historic structures. These properties receive stronger protections and broader zoning incentives under the Historic Resource Overlay District (HROD).
- **Class II** properties meet at least two Category A criteria, focusing on local significance such as age, neighborhood character, or visual prominence. They are often not nationally recognized but still contribute to the Township’s historic fabric. While they are also regulated under the HROD, the review process and incentives are generally more flexible than for Class I resources.

*As a result of this designation, the applicants were required to appear before the Township’s Historical Commission to present their proposed improvements for review on April 28, 2025. Planning staff has reviewed the applicant’s recently submitted materials and confirms that the applicant has met the recommendations of the Historical Commission subcommittee.*



### Existing Conditions and Property History

#### **382 Bala Avenue – “Women’s Club” (aka Ballroom Building)**

- Consists of a 17,132 sq. ft. net lot parcel which fronts Bala Avenue. It is improved with a brick structure, commonly referred to as the "Ballroom Building," which has a footprint of approximately 5,280 sq. ft., along with a driveway and one designated parking space. It also has an office, kitchen, café/lobby, storage room, and several outdoor patios.
  - The building was built in 1926 and from the 1920s until 2016, the property was owned by the Women’s Club of Bala Cynwyd (WCBC). During this period, the Ballroom Building was utilized for club functions and community events, while an adjacent structure, known as the Library Building, served as a public library. In 2016, the property was transferred to The Merion Foundation, which continued to host public events and meetings for nonprofit and corporate entities.
    - In anticipation of the Applicant’s acquisition of the parcel and future lot consolidation and land development submission, a Memorandum of Understanding was executed between the applicant and the Township on May 3, 2024, outlining the permitted uses of the property by both parties on designated days. The Township confirmed that the proposed uses were consistent with historical operations and compliant with the IC3 Zoning District. A zoning permit reflecting these uses was issued to The Merion Foundation on May 9, 2024, and the Applicant completed the acquisition of the property in July 2024.



#### **327 Levering Mill Road - “Levering Mill Tribute House” (aka Library Building)**

- Consists of a 6,155 sq. ft. net lot parcel fronting Levering Mill Road. It is improved with a smaller brick structure, known as the "Library Building," which has an 1,806 sq. ft. footprint and an additional 1,433 sq. ft. paved areas.
  - The building was built in 1926 and contains a library, two conference rooms and a small kitchen.



## ZONING HEARING BOARD (ZHB) HISTORY & APPEALS:

- **November 21, 2024:** The applicant filed an appeal from the Township Zoning Officer’s interpretation that the addition triggered a requirement for eight (8) additional parking spaces, and concurrently requested a variance, contending that only the 800 sq. ft. footprint should be used to calculate the parking requirement, which would yield an obligation for only four (4) parking spaces. The Applicant sought to construct a two-level link addition, comprising 750 sq. ft. below grade and 775 sq. ft. above grade, to connect the existing Ballroom and Library Buildings.
- **December 19, 2024:** ZHB heard applicants’ testimony and evidence stating that due to the physical conditions of the property—namely the size and location of the historic buildings and the impervious coverage already exceeding the IC3 zoning district maximum—no code-compliant parking spaces could be constructed on-site. The ZHB found that these physical conditions created an unnecessary hardship not self-imposed by the applicant and that strict compliance with the Zoning Code was not feasible. Further, the ZHB determined that the proposed addition would not increase the intensity of the existing use, and would not negatively affect public health, safety, or welfare. It would enhance site security and provide accessible building circulation.
- **January 16, 2025:** Zoning Hearing Board (ZHB) issued a decision granting a variance to Gratz College from the off-street parking requirements set forth in [Code Chapter 155.8.1 Minimum Parking Requirements - Table 8.1](#), in connection with a proposed addition to the properties located at 382 Bala Avenue and 327 Levering Mill Road.
  - Accordingly, the ZHB granted the requested variance, subject to the conditions that: (1) The two lots comprising the subject Property be legally consolidated, and (2) The use of the link addition remain substantially in accordance with the testimony and plans presented at the hearing. The appeal from the Zoning Officer’s interpretation was dismissed as moot upon the granting of the variance and no additional parking spaces were required.

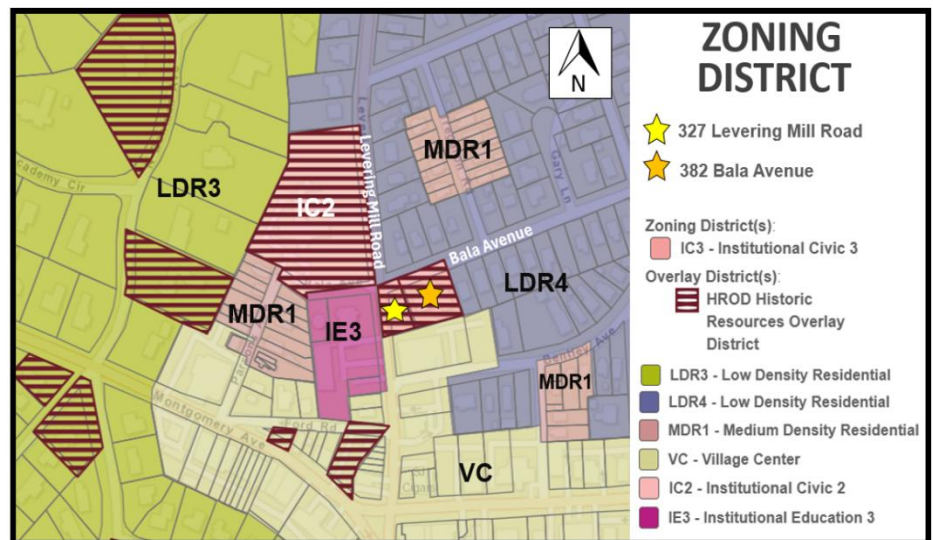
## ZONING DISTRICT – INSTITUTIONAL EDUCATION (IC3):

The property is located in the one of the four Institutional Zoning District, which are intended to accommodate institutional uses, civic uses, and large open space preserves. The Township’s institutional zoning framework for the Institutional Civic District includes three categories—IC1, IC2, and IC3—reflecting a range of uses and their potential impacts. The proposal is located with the IC3 district.

The Institutional Civic regulations aim to define and support communally beneficial land uses such as arts and cultural organizations, religious institutions, senior housing, and wellness or recreational facilities.

The intent is to provide a regulatory structure that supports the long-term sustainability and adaptability of institutions, while also ensuring compatibility with surrounding residential neighborhoods.

The framework acknowledges the diverse missions and evolving needs of institutional uses, including changes in function and physical growth, while balancing these with the community’s interest in minimizing potential conflicts related to institutional activities and expansion.



## FORM STANDARDS:

The proposal is subject to the standards contained within Table 4.4.2.C. Institution Civic (IC) - IC3 Dimensional Standards. The following table details the applicable standards and proposed conditions:

Table 4.4.2.C. Institution Civic (IC) - IC3 Dimensional Standards					
REQUIRED		EXISTING 327 Levering Mill Road	EXISTING 382 Bala Avenue	EXISTING After Consolidation	PROPOSED After Consolidation
<b>Lot Occupation (See § 155-3.4, Lot occupation.)</b>					
<b>A</b>	Lot width	60 feet	114.05 ft.	139.50 ft.	253.55 ft.
	Lot area	7,500 square feet minimum	6,117 sq. ft.	17,049 sq. ft.	23,166 sq. ft.
	Impervious surface	47% maximum	3,513 sq. ft. 57% (Existing Non-conforming)	8,998 sq. ft. 52% (Existing Non-conforming)	12,511 sq. ft. 54% (Non-conforming)
<b>Setbacks (See § 155-3.5, Frontages.) (feet)<sup>1</sup></b>					
<b>B</b>	Front	25	11 ft.	25.3 ft.	25. ft.
<b>C</b>	Side	50 (*2)	23.2 ft.	17.37 ft.	17. ft.
<b>D</b>	Rear	50 (*2)	3.29 ft.	27.2 ft.	25 ft.
<b>Building Height (maximum) (See § 155-3.3, Building height.)</b>					
<b>E</b>	Principal	3 stories up to 40 feet (*3)	1 Story	2 Story	2 Story
<b>Parking (See Article VIII, Parking Standards.)</b>					

### NOTES:

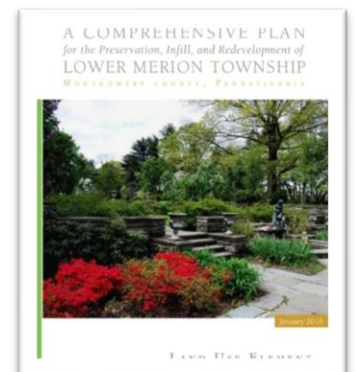
- (1) Setbacks may be subject to an increase based on building height.
- (2) Minimum twenty-foot buffer is required.
- (3) Maximum four stories or 52 feet where setbacks are increased by 50 feet. Buildings may be four stories or 52 feet in height without an increased setback along the primary road.

## REGIONAL & TOWNSHIP COMPREHENSIVE PLAN COMPLIANCE: “Institutional Land Use”

The Institutional Land Use section of the 2016 Lower Merion Township Comprehensive Plan identifies Educational Institutions as vital components of the community’s social capital and built environment. Institutions can be broadly defined as land uses which serve a community’s educational, religious, social, healthcare, recreational, and cultural needs. Institutions may be privately owned or owned and/or operated by government agencies.

Private schools play an important role in the Township’s overall educational system and provide an impressive variety of non-public educational alternatives for Township residents. Some private schools also offer educational, recreational, and cultural programs that are not typically included in the public-school curriculum in the region.

- **“How does this application meet the Comprehensive Plan Requirements?”** The expansion of Gratz College will continue this pattern outlined in the Comprehensive Plan. The proposed expansion does not conflict with the Township Comprehensive Plan.



**MEETING SCHEDULE & PROCESS:**

The *tentative* schedule for the Preliminary Land Development plan request is as follows:

	<a href="#">Monday, July 28, 2025</a>	Planning Commission	Review of the Preliminary Land Development Plan
<i>Upcoming</i>	<a href="#">Wednesday, July 30, 2025</a>	Building & Planning Committee	Review of the Preliminary Land Development Plan
	<a href="#">Monday, August 4, 2025</a>	Board of Commissioners	

Additional information about the Township’s Land Development approval process is illustrated in the [Subdivision & Land Development Flowchart](#). This application is currently in the *Stage 4: Public Meetings* portion of the process.

**ADDITIONAL REVIEWS:**

- **Township Engineer’s Review dated July 22, 2025:** (Attached) The Township Engineer’s review spoke to transportation improvements at the Bala Avenue and Levering Mill Road intersection and noted that the applicant shall provide an analysis to determine whether stop signs are warranted on Levering Mill Road, as well as a parking tabulation to support the expanded use. The review comments have been incorporated into the staff’s recommended conditions of approval.
- **Montgomery County Planning Commission (MCPC) Review dated July 7, 2025, last revised July 23, 2025:** (Attached) MCPC generally supports the proposed application did not identify any substantive changes to the amount or type of development proposed. Planning staff notes that the County has identified an issue with the species diversity in the buffer per code SALDO Code §135-5.8.A.6, TABLE 5.8.1. The Township has added a condition of approval to address the issue which reads:
  - *“The applicant shall work with Township staff to add additional plant material within the existing buffer to meet the minimum species requirement for SALDO Code §135-5.8.A.6, TABLE 5.8.1.”*
- **Neighborhood Club of Bala Cynwyd Civic Association:** Gratz President Zev Eleff and Board Chair David Brawer presented the project on July 11, 2025, to incoming Zoning Chair Brian McGuire and Ward Commissioner Gilda Kramer. The group reviewed the SALDO application, drawings, and discussed the broader operations and plans. They were in favor of the plans.

**CONSIDERATIONS:**

**1. RELIEF REQUEST FROM (SALDO) SUBDIVISION LAND DEVELOPMENT ORDINANCE REQUIREMENT**

The applicant has requested relief from [SALDO Code §135-3.2.A\(1\) to not provide a Tentative Sketch Land Development Plan](#) before the submission of the Preliminary Land Development Plan: This code section reads:

A. *Tentative sketch plans.*

(1) *When required. A tentative sketch plan shall be required when the proposed development equals or exceeds eight dwelling units or five acres of land or when the plan includes nonresidential development. When a tract is proposed for development within an Open Space Preservation District, applicants shall submit two sketch plans. In all other cases, a tentative sketch plan shall be considered optional.*

**Applicant’s Burden:**

- The SALDO requires that applicants provide a clear justification for any requested waiver, along with an alternative design that demonstrates equivalent or improved results. To meet this requirement, the applicant has submitted the following justification:
  - *“Although the project is nonresidential in nature and would typically require the submission of a Tentative Sketch Plan, the applicant has elected to proceed directly to Preliminary Plan review due to the level of coordination and review already undertaken. The applicant has met with Township Staff on multiple occasions to review the proposal, submitted the project for zoning relief before the Zoning Hearing Board, presented the proposal to the Historical Architectural Review Board (HARB), and provided detailed plans and supporting documentation to the*

*Land Development Committee for their consideration. Given the scope of coordination to date, the applicant believes that the intent of the Tentative Sketch Plan review process has been effectively satisfied and respectfully requests that the project proceed without formal submission of a Tentative Sketch Land Development Plan.”*

**Township Response:**

- Since the proposal is interior to the site and does not require additional parking spaces, the project’s improvements are minor to the site. Given that the Township has already provided substantial feedback on the applicant’s Preliminary Land Development application, including extensive comments from the Land Development Committee, multiple meetings with staff, and a Zoning Hearing Board decision, the project has been vetted by staff. The applicant also met with representatives of the Neighborhood Club of Bala Cynwyd, who expressed no opposition to the project.

**PLANNING COMMISSION ACTIONS & STAFF RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The Planning Commission must take the following actions with respect to this application:

1. Provide a recommendation on the requested Relief from [SALDO Code §135-3.2.A\(1\)](#) *to not submit a Tentative Sketch Land Development Plan application.*
2. Provide a recommendation on the requested Preliminary Land Development Plan application.