

## Superintendent Kelly plans to leave Radnor Township School District

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# Traffic studies dominate zoning board meeting on Kohelet school expansion

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ARDMORE >> It was a battle of the traffic reports during a Feb. 22 meeting of the Lower Merion Zoning Hearing Board, as experts and attorneys jockeyed back and forth using traffic study numbers to press their case as to the impact the proposed expansion to the Kohelet Yeshiva High School would have on traffic in the adjoining neighborhood.

The discussion was yet another step on the long road to gain approval for expansion of the school's campus in Merion Station.

Two traffic engineers were heavily questioned by attorneys representing both sides of the issue, with conflicting views as to whether a doubling of the number of students at the school - with the proposed addition of a kindergarten through 8th grade program - would indeed create greater traffic congestion for the surrounding streets.

At odds are traffic studies performed by engineers on behalf of Kohelet and for a group of neighbors who are opposed to the expansion of the school. The studies differ in their assessments of the impact that an increase in traffic would have on the streets surrounding the school, which is located at the corner of Old Lancaster Road and Highland Avenue.

The Kohelet study was undertaken by Greg Richardson, Executive Vice President of Traffic Planning and Design, Inc. (TPD) in Pottstown,

in May 2015.

That study appears to show no significant negative impact to the traffic flow. On the other side, David Horner, President of Horner & Canter Associates, a transportation and traffic engineering firm, conducted an October, 2015 traffic study on behalf of the neighborhood group, showing that there would be a significant impact created by the addition of cars and buses to accommodate the additional numbers of students.

Asked to interpret the TPD study, Brian Keaveney, Associate Vice President of Pennoni, a consulting engineering firm that serves as Lower Merion Township's engineering consultant, said his initial interpretation was that the scope of study – deciding which intersections to use to gather and evaluate traffic data - were sufficient for the plan as initially presented to him. That study looked at traffic numbers pertaining to traffic in and out of the two driveways to the school property, with the entrance on Highland Avenue and the exit onto Old Lancaster Road, as well as the signaled intersection at Highland and Old Lancaster, which is the highest volume intersection in the area.

Keaveney said based on the information provided to him by Richardson, he believed review of the two school driveways “would provide a good enough idea as to whether nearby intersections would be impacted” by the school's proposed expansion.

“Fundamentally, to be fair to the school, we need to determine whether this traffic can be handled safely on surrounding roadways. Not having reviewed Richardson's study in depth, there will be some delay, but there is some margin of acceptability in absorbing the additional traffic,” Keaveney said.

Keaveney added he has only been involved in this initial stage of the development plan, to advise Richardson as to the appropriateness of the areas to be studied; he said he has not yet received the completed TPD study to review the results compiled by Richardson.

At issue during one point in the meeting was the content of emails between Keaveney and Richardson, as to the intent of what was to be studied. Keaveney said he was retained by Richardson in May 2015, when he was approached with the initial scope of study, outlining the number of intersections that would be studied for the proposed school expansion. Text from some of the emails was produced in an attempt to determine whether Keaveney and Richardson had additional conversations about what aspects of the study would be undertaken.

Keaveney said he had no additional conversations with Richardson concerning scope of the work and said emails were an accepted form of communication for this type of work.

Under detailed questioning from attorney Joseph Hirsch, who represents a group of neighbors challenging the plan, Horner described data from his October 2015 study, which found that a projected increase of 180 students, doubling the school's current enrollment, would result in a drop in the level of service of the roadways, from a level C to a level D. Horner's study included traffic counts at the Highland-Old Lancaster signaled intersection, as well as at the entrance on Highland Avenue and exit onto Old Lancaster Road, and at the junction of Old Lancaster and Melrose Avenue-Summit Lane, approximately 50 feet north from the exit drive at the school.

Horner said this additional roadway was studied because of its proximity to the exit of the school property. Existing traffic volume was



counted during the peak periods from 7-9 a.m. on a weekday morning, when school was in session all day, and again from 3:30-5:30 p.m. Both vehicular and pedestrian traffic were documented, Horner said.

In later questioning from Kohelet attorney Fred Fromhold, Horner said based on his traffic counts, the peak hour for travel to and from the school is between 8-9 a.m., and again from 4:30-5:30 p.m., when levels of service would be most impacted.

In compiling his results, Horner said he used the Institute of Transportation Engineers (ITE) study to calculate future traffic impact generated by a K-12 private school, since this is the proposed plan for the school. In using the ITE study as a guide, Horner said he looked at parameters that distinguish between public and private school uses and differences between elementary, middle and high school uses of similar properties, adding that he believes his results were reasonable.

“There’s a significant difference between a high school and one that also includes elementary and middle school students. We have to fully understand the use, both current and in the future,” Horner said. “By adding an elementary school component, (with) a lot of parent pick-up and drop-off and pedestrian traffic, there is a very different dynamic. To underestimate this would be a concern from a traffic and safety standpoint,” he added.

Horner’s study concluded that expansion of the school and doubling of its enrollment would cause the level of service to drop from a C to a D during the morning hours, and from a level B to a D in the afternoon.

Horner also noted that there are not enough ‘car stacking spaces’ on the school property to accommodate the increase in number of cars additional students would generate.

“There is not enough internal room to stack everyone who might want to pick up and drop off, possibly resulting in cars stacking onto Highland Avenue,” Horner said, adding that at a traditional elementary school site there is a defined plan for these purposes.

“This is retrofitting this situation into an existing layout,” he said.

Horner’s report further concluded that the projected increase in traffic would be approximately 261 cars in the morning peak hour and 174 in the afternoon peak hour, over and above the current numbers, resulting in an increase of between five and eight times existing traffic in the area surrounding the school.

Horner was challenged by Zoning Hearing Board Chair Ken Brier, who asked why the addition of a ‘lower school’ would generate these numbers. Horner responded that the difference would stem from the additional buses needed, but primarily from cars picking up and dropping off students, which is a “huge component” of a lower school and a scenario that is not on the site currently.

Horner said his data was taken using formulas in the ITE study. He added that if a new K-12 school were being built at the site, these are the numbers the ITE study would project for a new, private school.



Brier further probed Horner on this issue, asking how he accounted for methods of transportation to the school. Horner responded that private schools typically draw from a larger area and have less walkers, and national study averages, like those referenced from ITE studies, suggest the values he submitted in his report. Horner also offered that on a specific day, more walkers could equal less students on the bus or being dropped off, but if he could hazard a guess, students coming in from areas as far as Cherry Hill would likely yield additional kids on buses.

Horner also discussed the 'peak hour factor' as a way to determine or factor in a 'peaking characteristic' of an intersection. He described peaking as taking a traffic count for an hour and averaging the results.

Referring to the Highway Capacity Manual 2010 study, (HCM is a standard that engineers to follow, though there are a lot of variables as to how to factor the traffic numbers into the equations) Horner said he referred to highlighted sections that look at taking peak 15 minute traffic flows to identify the highest 15 minutes of flow rate (which would mean in a designated time period four times the count from the peak 15 minutes would be considered.) If traffic counts are available during peak 15 minutes, Horner explained, then you have the data needed. He said this is known as the 'peak hour factor of one' using the count of the greatest 15 minute period.

He added that he would expect the peak factor in a school driveway to appear at arrival and dismissal time.

Horner was challenged in follow-up questioning by Fromhold, who pointed out that there was no mention of buses or heavy vehicles in Horner's report. He asked why Horner did not think it was significant to include this information in his report.

Horner responded that he did note the occurrence of buses in the data, but did not put actual counts into his report.

Horner said his numbers project a level of service D in both the morning and afternoon, using actual counts at the driveways and intersection. Peaking characteristics are the main difference with his study and the TPD traffic study commissioned by Kohelet. Schools are known to have an extreme peaking characteristic due to counts at dismissal time, which cannot be ignored in this case, Horner said.

Only one neighborhood resident stepped forward to question the traffic engineers.

Barbara Sylk, of Merion, asked if weather conditions are taken into consideration when collecting traffic counts, and if this variable would impact pick-up and drop-off numbers.

Horner responded that in undertaking his study he looked at a 'typical day' and did not intentionally look for inclement weather, but added that the zoning board should consider this condition "because it addresses potential queuing issues which could dramatically increase the numbers of cars pick-up students."

In explaining the zoning language, Keaveney described a level of service as a way to take calculations of actual traffic counts and present it in certain ranges of wait time.

A level of service C is 15-25 seconds of delay for vehicles on minor, or secondary streets, waiting to turn out of the intersection. Level of service D would be 25-35 seconds wait.

Keaveney said these benchmarks come from the Highway Capacity Manual, a standard that engineers follow, though he added that there are several variables included in the manual that are factored in to each individual study.

In the studies currently under review, one critical variable in considering the expansion for the school is that it can't result in traffic impact that would go below level C, Keaveney added.

With attorneys on both sides indicating they will bring in more experts to be questioned, the Zoning Hearing Board will continue to hear testimony on the Kohelet proposal well into March, with additional meetings planned for Feb. 25, March 7 and March 17.

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