

Main Line Times > News

## Lower Merion zoning board hears concerns about stormwater runoff during latest meeting on Kohelet expansion

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MERION STATION >> The severe weather that tore through the Philadelphia region Wednesday night provided the perfect backdrop for one of the key points made by attorneys and experts for a group of neighbors opposed to the expansion of the Kohelet Yeshiva High School in Merion Station.

At the latest meeting of the Lower Merion Zoning Hearing Board a day later, the issue of stormwater management, and the impact of additional runoff toward homes in the immediate area surrounding the school, was discussed less than 24 hours after the area suffered storms and flash floods, causing at least two neighborhood residents to have their gas and electricity turned off for the night.

Attorneys for residents opposing the school's proposal asked civil engineer Mark Padula to give his opinion as to the impact a change in the topography of the property would have if the area experienced another large storm event.\

The expansion calls for a 10,192-square-foot addition to be built onto the existing main building of the school, as well as a 2,180-square-foot addition on another part of the property.

Padula, a senior project manager for Yerkes Associates, Inc., and engineering consulting firm in West Chester, offered that the amount of impervious surface that would be created by expansion of the current building and construction of the new school building would far exceed the allowable limits for the site under the township's zoning code for a R1 district.

The code allows for a maximum of 21 percent of impervious surfaces on the site; the Kohelet plan calls for a proposed increase from 33.12 to 33.56 percent of impervious surface on the site once the expansion was completed, or an increase of .4 percent, Padula said. He added that the current square footage of the buildings on the property total about 85,000-square-feet, as outlined in the site plan submitted by Kevin Momenee of Momenee and Associates, which drew up the original site plan for the expansion.

Momenee's plan shows that number would grow to about 89,121-square-feet, Padula said, though he disagreed with that number, saying his review of the plan shows an increase to 91,653-square-feet. Padula said that the numbers are close, but still within reason. The school property sits on 6.1 acres.

This increase in impervious surface would result in an exacerbation of stormwater problems that are already on the site, according to neighbors who oppose the plan.

Attorney Fred Wentz, who represents three homeowners, asked Padula if he believed there was an existing stormwater management problem on the Kohelet site that impacts the neighborhood immediately surrounding the school's property.

Padula responded yes, saying that he thought the stormwater problem would be compounded by the expansion.

Padula based his opinion on runoff from homes currently located at 280 and 284 Melrose Avenue, which are slated to be torn down under the plan.

Stormwater runoff would more likely be directed in a southwesterly direction, toward N. Highland Ave., Padula said, causing increased water to pool on the properties of other nearby homes. Discussion also centered on how the water would behave once it infiltrated the ground, and which way the water would flow – toward properties on N. Highland or in another direction.

Zoning Hearing Board Chair Ken Brier noted that once the two homes in question are torn down, there would no longer be impervious surfaces on those lots, leaving behind pervious ground where the water could soak in. If the project were to move forward to the land development phase, Brier said, wouldn't the township be looking at stormwater management options at that point?

He added that Padula seemed to be offering his "best guess or speculation as to what the water flow would do underground."

Padula answered yes to both of Brier's queries.

Kohelet attorney Fred Fromhold questioned where the stormwater problems would be exacerbated. Discussion focused on the Zauderer property at 275 N. Highland Ave., which could absorb most of the impact from runoff. Fromhold asked if township stormwater management requirements are met, would that protect the public interest? Padula answered "that's the way the code is set up." Brier asked whether Padula had made the determination that the water flowing onto the Zauderer property is coming from the Kohelet site. Padula speculated that when water pools on the street and in the driveways that it could run onto the Zauderer property; he added there is about a seven-foot difference in elevation between the school and homeowner properties.

No one from the Zauderer property attended the meeting. Padula said he was not a hydrogeologist and that he did not look at any stormwater plan for the site, though he said he has walked the property and been inside the home.

Joseph Hirsch, another of the neighborhood's attorneys, said this is not an impervious-neutral expansion. He urged no further currently permitted impervious expansion for Kohelet.

"There is an increase in impervious surface (under the proposed plan), but no application has been filed to allow for overage, without a variance to increase it," Hirsch said.

Land planning, and the school proposal's adherence to the guidelines in the township's zoning code, was also called into question by another of the opposition's experts.

James A. Miller, a professional planner based in Moorestown, N.J., said that there were several points at which the Kohelet plan deviated from allowable limits in the code in a R1 zoning district.

Under questioning from Wentz, Miller pointed to several zoning code deviations.

Among them: the substantial increases in traffic noted in David Horner's study (outlined in detail at the Feb. 22 meeting); spacing and density regulations and the doubling of students and traffic; loading and queuing requirements as discussed

in the traffic reports, including the need for additional stacking spaces for cars on the school property (Miller said he believed 18 spots were needed, as opposed to the six currently available); oversized spaces for school buses (the plan calls for two, however, the standard calls for six to eight, Miller said, adding that the zoning standard does not permit the stacking of buses or cars to block parking spaces).

Miller said long queues would form along the parking spaces, effectively blocking them. He added that the site does not have the capacity to accommodate the number of students proposed in the plan, adding that there is anecdotal evidence that there would be spillover into the adjoining neighborhood.

Miller also echoed comments made earlier by Padula about the need for a wider buffer between the school property and existing homes, noting in particular the Zauderer property that is currently separated from the school by only a 20-foot buffer.

"A 50-foot buffer is needed, which intensifies the impact to the homeowner, and the current impact hasn't yet been addressed," Miller offered.

Padula had noted earlier that any building expansion resulting in space up to 70,000-square-feet requires a 20-foot buffer. Since the Kohelet proposal calls for expansion beyond that number, Padula said a greater buffer zone is required.

Returning to the issue of stormwater runoff, Miller said "the township is using impervious surface controls that are in place to deal with runoff and drainage conditions and mitigate potential damage. Impervious surface control establishes appropriate intensity of land use for a particular zoning district," Miller said. "There should be 55,000-square-foot (limit for) what's appropriate in this zoning district.

"(This plan is) violating intensity standards in a R1 zoning district, with significant overages in impervious surface with this proposed expansion. Impervious surfaces would go from 21 to 33 or 34 percent, a significant deviation from the standard in a R1 zone," he said.

Miller continued, "It's significant because of spillover impacts that go with this deviation. Impacts from the existing school spill over into the community, intensifying this use. (It's) over the threshold, and overages that spill into the adjoining neighborhood will adversely affect the character of the neighborhood.

What you have here is a use that's larger, much greater intensity than what is intended for this site."

"Cumulative deviations have great impacts on the surrounding neighborhood. When you look at all of the different impacts that ordinance seeks to control, this proposal goes far beyond and would have detrimental impact on the neighborhood," Miller concluded.

In summing up the testimony from the opposition's experts, Brier said stacking, queuing and impervious surfaces are areas the zoning board members are interested in hearing more about.

Board members were also shown photographs taken on Jan. 22, 2016 by Melrose Avenue resident Thomas R. Schmuhl documenting traffic back-ups on Highland Avenue approaching the French International School of Philadelphia, located at 150 N. Highland. Schmuhl's photos showed a line of cars waiting in the Bala Cynwyd Library parking lot, waiting to turn onto N. Highland for pick-up at the school building, as well as a line-up of cars on Old Lancaster Road waiting to turn onto N. Highland. Schmuhl said that the amount of traffic approaching the French school at pick-up time grows within minutes of the dismissal time at the Kohelet school.

Schmuhl asserted that the increase in the numbers of students from Kohelet would exponentially add to the congestion with cars going toward both schools at nearly the same times of the day. He concluded that the proposed Kohelet

expansion would adversely affect the health, safety and welfare of the Merion community, in particular those homeowners on Melrose Avenue and other surrounding homes.

The board also heard from Michael Seiden, president of the Merion Civic Association, who presented a resolution adopted by the group urging the zoning hearing board to deny the Kohelet application for expansion. The resolution echoes Schmuhl's stance as to the adverse effects on the neighborhood. Seiden was one of the homeowners whose property and home absorbed water damage from the Feb. 24 storm and was without gas or electricity overnight.

The meeting was a continuation of a Feb. 22 meeting during which the results of traffic studies in the area were dissected and challenged. The next meeting of the Zoning Hearing Board will be held on Monday, March 7 at 6:30 p.m. in the second floor meeting room of the Union Fire Association building at 149 Montgomery Ave. in Bala Cynwyd.

In other business, the board approved a special exception allowing for the proposed construction of an above-ground mausoleum on the Calvary Cemetery site on Old Gulph Road in West Conshohocken.

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