



*Hearing, Jan 7 Article*

Concerns about increased bus and vehicle traffic have been one source of opposition to the expansion proposal by some neighbors of Kohelet Yeshiva High School.

MERION STATION >> A zoning hearing on plans for expansion on Kohelet Yeshiva High School's campus in Merion Station Jan. 7 took an unexpected detour, when results of a traffic impact study were called into question.

Coming after a nearly two-month hiatus, the fifth night of testimony before the Lower Merion Zoning Hearing Board since early September, was expected to focus on information from a traffic engineer in connection with an application by the Kohelet Foundation, which operates the Modern Orthodox high school. The foundation is seeking a special exception to expand the educational use on the site by adding kindergarten through eighth grades.

Concerns about increased bus and vehicle traffic, if the current enrollment cap of 180 students is doubled to 360 with the younger grades, have been one source of opposition to the proposal by some neighbors of the school, which draws students from as far away as Northeast Philadelphia and Cherry Hill.

Plans for changes on the campus at 223 N. Highland Ave. have also been controversial. To accommodate the higher enrollment, the school plans a major new classroom building addition at the front of the existing building, near North Highland Avenue's intersection with Old Lancaster Road. A smaller classroom addition to a wing of the school along Melrose Avenue is also planned. Finally, houses on two parcels the foundation owns at 280 and 284 Melrose Ave. are to be demolished to provide some new parking and a large open field that will be used for recreation and athletic practices.

After some additional testimony from the project's architect, Greg Richardson, of the firm Traffic Planning and Design, began a presentation of findings from traffic counts collected last May 21. Richardson said traffic movements at three intersections, including the North Highland/Old Lancaster intersection and at the driveway entrance to campus from North Highland and exit on Old Lancaster Road, were studied to determine existing conditions at peak morning and afternoon hours.

Next, Richardson said projections for vehicle trips generated by the increased enrollment were performed, to determine the future levels of service at the intersections. While he said there would be an increase in traffic volume and some increase in vehicle queuing on the campus exit drive, the intersections would continue to operate at today's level of service C during both peak periods, between 6:30 and 9 a.m. and 4 to 6:30 p.m. (Rankings range from A -- no congestion -- to F -- failing.)

Asked by Kohelet attorney Jamie Jun for his opinion whether "the peak traffic generated will be accommodated in a safe and efficient manner," Richardson agreed it would be, with "no undue congestion."

As Richardson completed his report, however, attorneys representing two groups of neighbors, questioned him about the date of the traffic study. To his knowledge, they wanted to know, was school in session that day? Richardson said he had consulted with school officials, and had been told school was in session.

When Joseph Hirsch, the attorney representing the Lower Merion Neighborhood Coalition, a group of 11 neighborhood residents, presented as an exhibit a page from the school's website, however, the validity of the study was thrown into question. According to the page from the school calendar, school was dismissed early, at 12:30 p.m., on May 21, 2015.

"If there was no dismissal [during the afternoon peak period] you wouldn't get an accurate count," Hirsch suggested, to which Richardson said, "I would agree." The afternoon peak hour findings "would have to be scrutinized," he said.

While Jun questioned the reliability of the calendar entry, zoning board Chairman Kenneth Brier said it was "very important to the board" to "find out if school was open that day." He called a short recess, asking Jun to consult with school officials to get an answer.

Returning, she acknowledged that there had been "a miscommunication." School had in fact been dismissed early that day. Considering that new information, she asked the board to allow the traffic study to be redone. As an alternative, she offered the opposing attorneys the option to use counts prepared by the neighbors' traffic expert to determine traffic impact.

Hirsch and attorney Fred Wentz, who represents three other neighbors, both objected to allowing Kohelet to amend its traffic study, but Brier told Jun to have a new study done. “The board wants a new report, [for] morning and afternoon, as soon as possible.”

At that point, still early in the evening, Jun said she had no additional witnesses to call. Wentz was asked to begin presenting his clients’ case. He called acoustical engineer Joseph Horesco to present his findings and opinion on the potential impacts of increased noise with the expanded school use, in particular use of the new recreational field planned close to homes on Melrose Avenue.

While Horesco said it was difficult to make exact projections because specific future uses are not known, his report includes information about the existing ambient noise on the site, which he stated is at a typical suburban level of 45 dBA (decibels). He said he did take his measurements on a “typical day when school was in session.”

With activity on the field – Kohelet officials have previously said there might be between 40 and 80 students at play at a time – noise can be expected to be “significantly greater than what you would find in a residential neighborhood,” Horesco summed up. Though certainly not harmful to hearing, “If [residents] are used to the sound levels right now and you add voices in a significant time period,” some might find it to be “a negative experience.”

Asked if he was aware that many other schools are located in residential neighborhoods in Lower Merion, Horesco replied that he reviewed the number.

Testimony by other witnesses was deferred for the night awaiting the new traffic numbers.

Brier set the date of the next session for testimony in the case as Jan. 28. The meeting will begin at 6:30 p.m. at the Township Building, 75 E. Lancaster Ave., Ardmore.

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