



Nov. 12 Hearing

Kohelet Yeshiva High School in Merion Station. Cheryl Allison photo.

MERION STATION >> The zoning hearing on Kohelet Yeshiva High School's plan to expand, which has generated controversy in its Merion Station neighborhood, will extend into 2016.

Following a fourth session Nov. 12, during which questions from neighbors and their attorneys extended testimony from a single witness for most of three hours, the Lower Merion Zoning Hearing Board continued the matter to a meeting Jan. 7, to begin at 7:15 at the Township Building.

That may be the night that traffic engineers hired by both the applicant and some of the opposing neighbors are called to review their analyses of traffic impacts of the plan, a main focus of neighborhood concern.

The Kohelet Foundation, which operates the Modern Orthodox school, is seeking special exception approval to expand the educational use on the campus at 223 N. Highland Ave. The plan calls for adding kindergarten through eighth grades, doubling the currently approved

enrollment to 360.

To accommodate the increase in enrollment, a major new classroom building addition would be constructed at the front of the existing building, toward the North Highland/Old Lancaster Road corner. A smaller classroom addition to a wing of the school along Melrose Avenue is also planned. (The core of the building, which housed Akiba Hebrew Academy, now Jack M. Barrack Hebrew Academy in Radnor, for more than 60 years, is the 1912 Linden Hall mansion, a Class 2 historic resource on Lower Merion's inventory.)

In another major change, the former Linden Hall carriage house at 280 Melrose Ave., and a single-family house at 284 Melrose are to be demolished, with most of those two parcels left as a grass field for student play and athletic practice. Some additional parking would be installed near that area.

The school is also seeking approval to hold winter and summer break programs for up to 50 students .

In previous sessions, neighbors have raised concerns about new bus and car traffic and potential overflow parking in the neighborhood with an increase of 180 students. They have also objected to what they see as a change in the residential character of Melrose Avenue with the loss of the two houses and new activity.

Questions last week initially focused on Kohelet's calculation of the area of a required landscaped buffer. Attorney Jamie Jun, representing Kohelet, said township staff have accepted its calculation excluding a lower level of the new classroom building as a basement, not counted as habitable floor area. With those calculations, a 38-foot-wide buffer would be required.

Joseph Hirsch, an attorney representing a group of neighborhood residents, and Fred Wentz, the attorney for three other clients, challenged the exclusion of the lower level, pointing out that plans show it will house classrooms, a commons area and a cafeteria. In a "common-sense" view, the area should be counted, they maintained. If included, a buffer of the maximum width of 50 feet would be required, they said.

The school's architect, Dan Russoniello, testified, however, that, in keeping with provisions of the township's building code regarding grade and other considerations, the area meets the definition of a basement and can be excluded.

Most questions were directed at Rabbi Gil Perl, head of school of Kohelet Yeshiva High School and chief academic officer of the Kohelet Foundation. The organization promotes the establishment of Jewish day schools.

Neighbors have been skeptical of the school's projections of the number of new bus trips and of the additional faculty and staff needed with 180 new students. The zoning board had said it wanted to hear from the head of school as one most qualified to speak about the school's programs.

Although Kohelet has presented information that it draws students from as far away as Cherry Hill and Bucks County, it has stated that only two additional buses, for a total of seven, may transport students, and that the number of additional car trips for drop-off and pick-up of

students will not be large.

Perl said at the high school level, about half of students come from within Lower Merion and half from outside the township.

For the new elementary school grades, however, he said a much larger percentage can be expected to come from the neighborhood and elsewhere in the township, and a number may walk to school. That can be assumed, he said, because there are Jewish elementary school programs "sufficient for families" in the Cherry Hill and Bucks communities.

To back that statement, he said that, of the 17 students enrolled in a kindergarten program Kohelet has started at a site in Narberth, only three come from outside Lower Merion.

Hirsch, however, questioned Perl about information on Kohelet's website that states as one of the foundation's goals "to attract many more students from outside the Greater Philadelphia region."

Perl explained that as meaning that, because the community in Lower Merion would be served by a school of Kohelet's type, "other Orthodox families are likely to move here" and enroll children.

"We would submit this is a regional school," Hirsch told the board in response.

Figures for future faculty and staff were also questioned.

Currently, Perl said, there are 33 full- and part-time faculty and 14 full-time staff for the high school, for a total of 47.

Despite doubling enrollment under the expansion, Kohelet has asked for approval of a total of 63, including 40 teachers, 15 staff and eight volunteers.

That is possible, Perl explained, because a smaller number of teachers will be needed for the elementary classrooms, which are expected to each include two grade levels.

At the middle and high school levels, in which male and female students will be separated for most classes, faculty will teach in specific subject areas, but some of the high school faculty will also teach middle school, he said.

There have also been questions about classes for adults and speaker events held at the campus's Beit Midrash study center, usually in the evening, and about religious services, such as High Holiday services, that have been held at the school.

While they were questioned as uses that might represent other types of expanded use, Perl said it is "quite common for Orthodox high schools" to offer those programs.

"This is not separate. It is what an Orthodox yeshiva high school community does," he said.

- [Return to Paging Mode](#)

Like 1



Reader Comments

55 Comments PA - Mainline Media News

Login

Recommend 2 Share

Sort by Best



Join the discussion...



politeia • 3 months ago

Hate to say it, but does it matter at this point? LM as a whole (and especially the eastern half of the township) is already a traffic nightmare and it will only get worse with all the commissioner approved developments all over the township. This is like pushing on a string.

I will give those in Merion and parts of Wynnewood credit for the effort to try and save their community, though. Commissioners for Ardmore, Wynnewood and Bala just want the development for personal business referrals and ratables. They have no prob with an urbanized LM - and the traffic mess that comes with it.

1 • Reply • Share



Bazungas politeia • 3 months ago

Let's see some examples of the "personal business referrals" for commissioners that we've heard so much about. DO they exist or is this more talking out of you know wear?