

ACTION

Office of the Superintendent of Schools
MONTGOMERY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS
Rockville, Maryland

July 15, 2021

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Board of Education

From: Monifa B. McKnight, Interim Superintendent of Schools

Subject: Montgomery County Planning Board Mandatory Referral—Northwood High School Addition/Facility Upgrades Project

In order to address the overutilization at the high schools in the Downcounty Consortium and at Walter Johnson High School, the adopted *FY 2019–2024 Capital Improvements Program* (CIP) included three capital projects to address overutilization at these schools. The approved CIP includes an expansion of Northwood High School, the reopening of Charles W. Woodward High School, and an addition at John F. Kennedy High School.

The Northwood High School expansion project will increase capacity to 2,500 students. The expansion of approximately 1,000 seats will require not only additional classrooms, but also a reconfiguration of existing spaces and upgrades to current building systems to accommodate the new student population. On March 25, 2019, the Board of Education approved the project to be constructed with students off-site and that Northwood High School would operate at the former Charles W. Woodward High School as a temporary holding facility during the construction period (Resolution No. 220-19).

The facility design process began in spring 2019, and consisted of community conversations as well as cross-agency collaboration. The preliminary plans for the project were presented to and approved by the Board of Education on February 10, 2020, (Resolution No. 82-20). The Montgomery County Public Schools (MCPS) Mandatory Referral submission was reviewed by the Montgomery County Planning Board on December 1, 2020.

In spring 2019, Montgomery County Planning and MCPS initiated a Mandatory Referral review to expand the design review process of publicly funded projects with significant community presence. Due to the limited review time allotted, school projects strongly were encouraged to submit a Concept Plan prior to filing a Mandatory Referral application, to allow for an early opportunity to address master plan, design, transportation, and other site development concerns.

Consistent with this process, MCPS submitted a Concept Plan on October 18, 2019, which was reviewed by the Development Review Committee on November 26, 2019. Several comments were provided during the concept review, including the recommendation to relocate the proposed building as close to University Boulevard as feasible in order to improve the relationship between the proposed school and University Boulevard, as well as to improve connectivity with the existing and proposed sidewalks, bikeways, and transit stops. Planning staff also recommended the consolidation of existing curb cuts along University Boulevard to improve the safety of pedestrians and bicyclists by minimizing conflicts with vehicles and buses.

The Development Review Committee feedback, as well as other stakeholder feedback, was incorporated to the maximum extent feasible and within reasonable compliance of the educational specifications, and culminated in the Mandatory Referral submission, dated December 1, 2020. This submission to the Planning Board met all requirements and resulted in a full Planning Board Review on April 8, 2021.

During this review, it is expected that the Planning Board consider all relevant land use and planning aspects of the proposal, including:

- Consistency with the County's General Plan, functional master plans, approved and adopted area master plans or sector plans, and other public programs for the area;
- Consistency with the intent and requirements of the zone;
- Compatibility in size, shape, scale, height, arrangement, and design with the surrounding neighborhood and properties;
- Adequacy, safety, and efficiency of the location of buildings, structures, open spaces, landscaping, recreation facilities, and pedestrian and vehicular circulation systems;
- Compatibility in size, shape, scale, height, and arrangement and design with the surrounding neighborhood and properties;
- Approved Natural Resources Inventory/Forest Stand Delineation and preliminary storm water management concept plan and whether it meets the requirements of the Forest Conservation Law. The Forest Conservation Plan must be approved by the Planning Board and is binding on all county projects;
- Preliminary or Final Water Quality Plan review by the Planning Board if the project is located in a Special Protection Area; and
- Whether the site is needed for park use if the proposal is the disposal of a surplus property, and whether alternatives have been considered for the project if the proposal is not consistent with the General Plan or other plans and policies for the area or has negative effects on the surrounding properties or neighborhood, the transportation network, and the environment or other resources.

During this hearing, the Planning Board staff raised several concerns and continued to encourage MCPS staff to create a strong public presence along University Boulevard and enhance the overall site design through a variety of design modifications. While the Planning Board ultimately approved the plan for Northwood High School, it did so with significant comments

for consideration. Several of the primary comments were provided in a letter from Mr. Casey Anderson, Chair, Montgomery Planning Board, dated May 13, 2021, and are listed below:

- Redesign the bus parking area along the school's frontage as a civic plaza for people that is occasionally used for bus parking – rather than a standard single-use parking lot – through pavers or colorful paint, as well as adjacent trees, landscaping, seating, and/or art to exude public use in most hours of the day, evening, weekends, and seasons.
- Recreate the front retaining wall facing University Boulevard to be a beautifully paved or designed “façade” with art, landscape, and an artistic top metal railing that announces the entry to Northwood High School in a proud and public way.
- Incorporate linear accessible ramps, rather than the proposed switchback ramps, into the natural University Boulevard landscapes.
- Connect the circulation completely around the school to allow for full use of the two access points to University Boulevard, especially during special events or at the beginning and end of the school day.
- Prioritize transportation-demand management type strategies to limit surge traffic and reduce queuing rather than explore roadway improvements. Strategies that could be considered include carpooling programs, limitations on student parking, and disincentivizing pick-up and drop-offs during the peak period of use.
- Construct a 16-foot wide breezeway asphalt side path for the entire extent of the site's frontage along University Boulevard (MD 193), accommodating no less than six feet of separation between the roadway curb and the front of the breezeway side path.
- Provide no more than two vehicular access points along University Boulevard (MD 193) into the site. Prior to any reconsideration of the site's proposed access program, provide the requested comparative analysis to demonstrate how the site performs with two access points and a “traditionalized” main entry vs. two points and the existing main entry.
- Provide bicycle parking in a minimum amount equivalent to the requirement for private schools (5 percent of the student population, 50 spaces maximum (all short-term) and 10 percent of employee population, 15 spaces maximum (all long-term)).
- Reduce curb radii at all access points to the tightest extent possible to slow turns in and out of the site.
- Improve pedestrian connections by providing better formalized connections to the Northwood Chesapeake Bay Trail and Loxford Terrace. In addition, provide seating opportunities for the open space area in 1125–1131 Loxford Terrace.

While many of these comments are consistent with longer-term county masterplan visions and intent, the scope of this review is based on the 2001 *Kemp Mill Master Plan* area, the 2018 *Bicycle Master Plan*, and the 2018 *Master Plan of Highways and Transitways*. MCPS strongly supports the implementation of all approved Master Plans; however, it must be reiterated that many of the comments that are intended to further the goals of future state conditions do so at the expense of operational requirements of a public high school in the current environment of the project, as well as to the fiscal constraints of public funding.

MCPS staff have reiterated that as a public agency that serves both school and neighborhood communities, we are committed to providing facilities and associated community amenities that meet the needs of today and tomorrow. It has been acknowledged that this approach will result in an on-going commitment and an understanding that our facilities will evolve as our schools and communities shift from driving to walking, biking, and transit. The Planning Board, however, “rejects this sentiment and has encouraged the Board of Education to acknowledge that the future is now”. The Planning Board “strongly encourages Montgomery County Public Schools and the Board of Education to design and build schools in a manner that anticipates our changing world, as well as address issues today rather than delaying them for the future”.

Following the Planning Board hearing date of April 8, 2021, the design team has attempted to further improve the design of Northwood High School. While there are several changes that could not be reasonably incorporated for both implications to operations as well as significant cost, the design team has modified the design to meet the intent of all comments. Modifications have been made to address 16 of the 22 comments received. The balance of comments is related to the full width breezeway that has significant cost implications to the overall project.

It is our intent through project design to balance and integrate all aspects of school site operations to ensure maximum safety of all, including pedestrians, bicyclists, student drivers, bus passengers, visitors, and persons utilizing drop-off and pick-up operations. The project plans have been developed in consultation with third-party pedestrian safety and traffic engineers, parent/guardian and community representatives, MCPS Department of Transportation, Montgomery County Department of Transportation, and Montgomery County Department of Permitting.

I recommend that the Board of Education continue the Northwood High School Addition and Facility Upgrade project with the plans as modified and presented at this time.

WHEREAS, The Montgomery County Planning Board reviewed the Mandatory Referral submission for the Northwood High School Addition/Facility Upgrade project on April 8, 2021; and

WHEREAS, The Montgomery County Planning Board issued a letter on May 13, 2021, citing concerns related to the Montgomery County Public Schools site design and recommended further revisions; and

WHEREAS, The Montgomery County Planning Board has provided the attached sketch that was developed by staff within the Montgomery County Planning Board office for consideration; and

WHEREAS, The Montgomery County Planning Board has outlined 22 specific comments that are to be considered for both construction implementation and future school building operational requirements; and

WHEREAS, The Board of Education has reviewed and assessed the recommendations and comments of the Montgomery County Planning Board; now therefore be it

Resolved, That the Board of Education approve the continuance of plans as designed to assure the Northwood High School Addition/Facility Upgrades project maintains all safety, operational, and programmatic goals, standards, and requirements; and be it further

Resolved, That a copy of this resolution be forwarded to the Montgomery County Planning Board.

MBM:ESD:SPA:lmr

Attachment

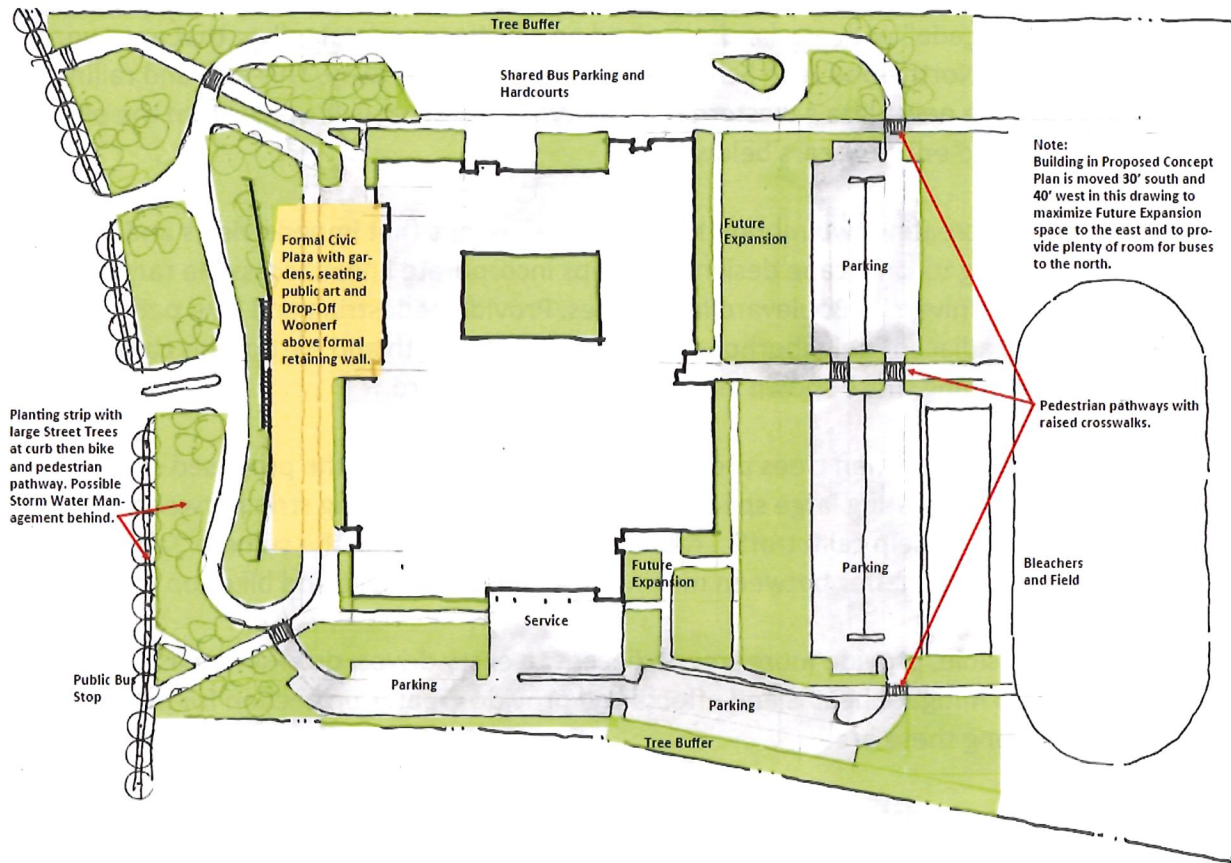


Figure 3: Urban Design proposed site plan