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March 20, 2024

TO: Joanna Roberts, Board Secretary
Borough of Metuchen Planning Board

FROM: Chris S. Cosenza, AICP, PP, LEED AP, **LRK**
Borough Planner's Office

RE: Capital Improvement Project Review / Courtesy Review

Emergency Services Center and Outbuilding Project Plan and Design
Borough of Metuchen – Applicant & Property Owner of Block 132, Lot 40-47 & 52
Metuchen Safety Council Inc. – Property Owner of Block 132, Lots 10-27 & 49-51
Robert White – Property Owner of Block 132, Lot 48
1 Safety Place
Metuchen, NJ 08840
Block 132; Lots 10-27 & 40-52
R-2 District (all lots) & R-8 Overlay District (all lots except Block 132, Lots 40-41 & 47-48)

Dear Ms. Roberts,

As requested, this office has reviewed the Capital Improvement Project for a new Emergency Services Center and Outbuilding submitted by the Mayor and Council (“Borough Council”), with the property owners’ consent, to the Planning Board (“Board”). The following summary and comments have been prepared for the Board’s review:

1.0 Summary

The Borough is in the process of the design and construction of a new Emergency Services Center and Outbuilding at the subject property, which will serve as a new location for the Metuchen Fire Department and Metuchen EMS. The existing Metuchen EMS building and all site improvements will be demolished to make room for the new facilities, including a building to be constructed fronting Essex Avenue, along with an outbuilding and a surface parking area located at the rear of the property along the Northeast Corridor Rail Line, and other site improvements. As part of the project, a portion of the Safety Place public right-of-way will be vacated, and several properties and the vacated portion of Safety Place will be consolidated into a single lot.

2.0 Nature of Review / Statutory Requirements

Summary

Given that the proposed capital improvement project involves the expenditure of public funds, the Borough Council shall appear before the Board for review and recommendation on the proposed project. The Board has 45 days to provide comments.



Background

In accordance with N.J.S.A. 40:55D-31(a), “*whenever the planning board shall have adopted any portion of the master plan, the governing body or other public agency having jurisdiction over the subject matter, before taking action necessitating the expenditure of any public funds, incidental to the location, character or extent of such project, shall refer the action involving such specific project to the planning board for review and recommendation in conjunction with such master plan and shall not act thereon, without such recommendation. ...*”

Additionally, in accordance with N.J.S.A. 40:55D-26(b), the “*governing body may by ordinance provide for the reference of any matter or class of matters to the planning board. ...*” To that end, in Section 110-200.G. of the Metuchen Land Development Ordinance (“Ordinance”), the Board has the power and duty to consider and make a report to the Borough Council concerning several matters including, among others, acquisition by the Borough of buildings and land, and the vacation of Borough or other public rights-of-way.

Commentary

The Board is to provide a review and recommendation of the capital improvement project proposed by the Borough Council. The review intended in the referenced statute is in the nature of a site plan review; however, the recommendations are non-binding on the Borough Council. This planning process provides the Borough an opportunity to consider the capital improvement project “...incidental to the location, character or extent of such project” as well as its implications on the Metuchen Master Plan.

3.0 Proposed Project

Project Narrative

As noted by the Borough’s professional consultant, H2M Architects,

“... [t]he new Emergency Services Center will be ... located at 1 Safety Place in the Borough of Metuchen. The existing EMS building that is on the current site will be demolished to make room for the new facilities. The Borough has acquired Lot 48 to be merged with Lots 10-27, 40-47 and 49-51 and a portion of safety place to be vacated to accommodate for the new Emergency Services Building and Outbuilding on a roughly 17,000 SF site. The Emergency Services Building will be a 14,000 SF one story building with a mezzanine. The building will face Essex Ave with the apron for the truck bays accessing Essex Ave directly. The new 3,800 [SF] outbuilding will be located towards the back of the site and will hold overflow vehicles and one police vehicle. The majority of the parking will be located toward the north east portion of the site and will be a total of 42 spaces, have a training pad and will be fitted for future solar opportunities. Site work on the site includes curbs, paving, sidewalks, utilities, striping, landscaping, trees, public sewer system and storm water mitigation. The new station will have 3 double deep pull through bays, 1 single bay, support spaces, a training mezzanine, adequate locker rooms, a radio room, workshop,



*administration space, day room, restrooms, exercise room, sleeping quarters and storage.
The outbuilding will have space for 5 vehicles including the bay for the Police.”*

Conditions and Surrounding Context

The existing site has been used by the Metuchen EMS for many years. Safety Place is a local public right-of-way that intersects Essex Avenue (New Jersey State Highway 27) and extends for a short distance and stubs along the Northeast Corridor Rail Line, and serves to provide access to the Metuchen EMS site and a surface parking area. There are no other properties that require access from Safety Place that cannot otherwise gain access from Essex Avenue.

The existing site is adjacent to the Action Yamaha of New Jersey (a motorcycle dealership) to the west, single-family detached dwellings on typical lots that front Essex Avenue to the south, single-family detached dwellings on deep lots that front Rose Street to the east, and the Northeast Corridor Rail Line right-of-way to the north. It is noted that there are several mature trees situated on the east side of the site and the rear yards of the deep lots that front Rose Street, which provide a natural buffer to those residences.

4.0 Master Plan Review

Since its adoption in 1959 and comprehensive update in 1983, the Metuchen Master Plan has been reexamined several times, most recently in 2016. As outlined below, the proposed capital improvement project is generally consistent with the Metuchen Master Plan and its construction is necessary to consolidate multiple municipal services which are currently in separate locations, and in existing buildings that are otherwise in poor condition.

Land Use & Community Character

Relative to land use, the Master Plan states that the Borough “is a mature community with little vacant land available. As such, future growth will continue to occur primarily through adaptive reuse, occasional infill, and redevelopment of previously development parcel.” Additionally, the Borough “has recognized the need to maintain its compact town center” and has been concerned and focused on the “preservation of the Borough’s essentially residential character, maintaining the integrity of its neighborhoods, and ultimately, its desirability as a community in which to live.”

The proposed project represents an efficient use of land at the Safety Place site, and Borough-operated public facilities are permitted principal uses in the underlying R-2 Residential District. Additionally, the proposed project serves as an effective “buffer” or “transition” from the Northeast Corridor Rail Line to the north as well as the non-residential use to the west, for the benefit of the surrounding single-family detached dwellings to the south and east. As to the site itself, so long as appropriate buffering and screening are provided, the project will contribute to the Borough’s effort to maintain the integrity of its residential neighborhoods, without disrupting the Borough’s general community character.



Housing

As part of the Housing Plan Element & Fair Share Plan adopted by the Board in 2016, Metuchen “provided two additional sites, South Main and Safety Place, that will be the focus for overlay zoning which will result in four (4) units of additional affordable housing over and above what the current ordinance permits.” A concept plan for the Safety Place depicted the potential for 13 townhomes, which would yield not more than three (3) affordable housing units. The R-8 Overlay Residential District has since been adopted; however, this overlay zoning does not apply to Lots 40-41 & 47-48, which are situated generally in the middle of the existing site.

Notwithstanding the above, the Borough has been proactive in developing “location efficient” policies and ordinances designed to reduce transportation costs and promote affordability within the downtown area, specifically within a five-minute walk of the Metuchen Train Station. As such, the Borough has approved several projects throughout the downtown area, above and beyond the development anticipated in the Master Plan, and plans to continue to do so.

Additionally, the proposed project provides an opportunity for the current firehouse site to be available for redevelopment, which would further the Master Plan’s focus on improving the Borough’s economic base by coordinating and facilitating revitalization efforts in and around the downtown area, including providing for affordable housing. It is noted that the current firehouse site has already been designated an “area in need of redevelopment” and is presently owned by the Borough.

Recreation & Open Space

The proposed project generally does not impact the goals & objectives of the Recreation & Open Space Plan adopted by the Board in 2016. The site is in proximity to several parks, including Kentnor Park and Memorial Park as well as the County’s Trailhead Park and Middlesex Greenway. There may be an opportunity to advance one of its goals “[t]o provide for pedestrian and bicycle connections between the various recreation and open space parcels in the Borough,” that is, between Kentnor Park and Trailhead Park. However, this would require further coordination with private property owners to the east, the Rose Street public right-of-way and Northeast Corridor Rail Line right-of-way.

Utilities, Public Facilities, and Services

The proposed project addresses a long-term need of the community, by upgrading both the Metuchen Firehouse and Metuchen EMS facilities with a new facility in a consolidated location. Additionally, as noted above, Metuchen being built out means its infrastructure is fully developed. Recent downtown development and infill has included renewed reinvestment in on-site and off-site improvements to infrastructure. This project will allow for infrastructure improvements on site, including improving storm drainage as well as incorporating green infrastructure.

Circulation & Complete Streets

The proposed project provides an opportunity for public services to continue to have frontage and access to State Highway 27, and therefore have access to the remainder of the community. With regards to the Metuchen’s Complete Streets Bicycle & Pedestrian Plan, the proposed project



advances the goal of incrementally expanding walking and bicycle facilities, including adding a new sidewalk along the frontage of the site (including in front of the wide driveway) as well as providing opportunities for bicycle and EV parking.

Historic Preservation

The proposed project generally does not impact the goals & objectives of the Historic Preservation Plan adopted by the Board in 2021. As previously noted, the proposed project provides an opportunity for the current firehouse site to be available for redevelopment which may provide an opportunity to incorporate the adjacent historic Washington Hose Company at 505 Middlesex Avenue to be preserved as part of a future redevelopment plan.

5.0 Plan Review

General Comments / Recommendations:

- The proposed construction timeline should be clarified, including the vacation ordinance for a portion of Safety Place, purchase of non-Borough-owned properties, mobilization for site work, building construction, and planned opening.
- The proposed front yard setback and massing of the front of the new building should be discussed in relation to the structures on adjacent properties.
- A “continental” crosswalk should be provided within the pedestrian route across Safety Place, and the stop bar and related improvements should shift accordingly.
- The location of the electric vehicle supply equipment (EVSE) should be shown, and the accessible EV parking space may need to be refined in order to ensure that the EVSE is actually accessible to those with a mobile disability.
- Any reference to “handicap” or “handicapped” should be substituted with “accessible.”
- The “wave” bike rack should be substituted with one (1) or two (2) inverted-U bike racks.
- The fence detail should be clarified. The plans indicate a board on board fence whereas the detail indicates a PVC fence.
- The trash enclosure should be a three-wall enclosure, with materials and finishes consistent with the materials and finishes of the proposed building.
- The exterior lighting should be clarified. The fixtures should be Dark-Sky Compliant, and the color temperature should not exceed 3,300K. Details should be provided for review.
- Deciduous trees should be provided throughout the site, including within the front yard area and within the planting stripe along the street, subject to the review and recommendation of the Shade Tree Commission; additionally, additional species of shrubs and evergreen trees should be considered to prevent monocultures.
- The free-standing sign should be set back five (5) feet from the front lot line, and should be lowered in height to be not more than five (5) feet in height above grade. Foundation plantings should be provided at the base of the free-standing sign.
- Lighting associated with the free-standing and wall-mounted signs should be clarified.



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- Although the building materials are generally consistent with other public buildings (namely Borough Hall), the beige color of the CMU banding may want to be slightly lighter. Additionally, the roof pitch of the tower element may want to be lower, to a traditional 12-on-12 pitch or lower.

Please feel free to contact me should there be any questions regarding the above.

pc: Melissa Perilstein, Borough Administrator (via email)
Tom DiMartino, Zoning Official (via email)
Robert F. Renaud, Esq., Board Attorney (via email)
Adam J. Colicchio, Esq. (via email)
Robert M. Mannix III, PE, PP, CME, Board Engineer (via email)
Jim Constantine, PP, Borough Planner (via email)

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