



TOWNSHIP OF WEST ORANGE

66 MAIN STREET, WEST ORANGE, N.J. 07052

Department of Planning and Development

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TO: Planning Board Members

FROM: Paul Grygiel, AICP, PP, Township Planner

DATE: June 2, 2023

RE: **PB-23-05C/County of Essex/Turtle Back Zoo/Animal Wellness Center**
Block: 163; Lot: 1; Zone: R-1
560 Northfield Avenue
Courtesy Review of Proposed Improvements

INTRODUCTION/LAND USE

The applicant is proposing to replace the existing Wolf Exhibit at the Turtle Back Zoo with a new Animal Wellness Center. The proposal will include construction of a new building and outdoor habitat areas, walkways, seating and landscaping.

The site is located in the R-1 Zone and abuts South Mountain Reservation, which spans several municipalities. To the east of the site is a residential neighborhood. There are commercial uses located on the north side of Northfield Avenue, with residential uses further north and to the west.

VARIANCES REQUIRED

None. The applicant is appearing before the Planning Board pursuant to the Municipal Land Use Law at N.J.S.A. 40:55D-31a, which requires public agencies expending public funds to refer development proposals to the municipal planning board for its review and recommendation related to the municipal master plan.



SUBMISSIONS

<u>SUBMISSION ITEM</u>	<u>SIGNED BY</u>	<u>DATE/REVISION</u>
Exterior Rendering	Gregory A. Comito, AIA, PP, Comito Associates PC	Not dated
Aerial Image	Gregory A. Comito, AIA, PP, Comito Associates PC	Not dated
Floor Plans	Gregory A. Comito, AIA, PP, Comito Associates PC	5/15/23
Conceptual Site Plan	Gregory A. Comito, AIA, PP, Comito Associates PC and French & Parrello Associates	12/5/22

DISCUSSION

The applicant is proposing to replace the existing Wolf Exhibit located in the northeast section of the Zoo, just south of the Bear Exhibit. The new building is proposed to be one story in height, although an exact building height has not been provided. It will include treatment and holding areas for animals, offices and support areas.

Other new proposed facilities in this application include an entrance plaza, seating areas and viewing areas. Pedestrian access will be provided by connections to existing Zoo walkways and vehicular access will be provided from an existing access road at the rear of the building.

The Planning Board's statutory duty pursuant to the Municipal Land Use Law at N.J.S.A. 40:55D-31a for applications of this type is for "review and recommendation" in conjunction with the West Orange Master Plan.

The Township's 2019 Master Plan Update provides an overview of changes to the Zoo and adjacent County facilities since 2010, as well as notes its continued increases in annual attendance.

A concern is raised in the Master Plan Update about maintaining a balance between preservation and recreation in South Mountain Reservation. While acknowledging the benefits to West Orange of the County's investment in this facility, the following is noted on page 61 of the December 2019 Master Plan Update:



However, there are concerns about the amount of development in the Reservation, and the transformation of formerly open areas into active recreation space and zoo facilities. The Township should continue to work with Essex County to allow for appropriate development without overwhelming what makes the South Mountain Reservation a special place.

The current proposal involves redevelopment of existing facilities within an already developed area of the Zoo, and therefore would not result in expansion of the Zoo beyond its existing boundaries. Therefore, the proposal is not inconsistent with the Master Plan.

