



MEMORANDUM

TO: Township of West Orange Planning Board

FR: Gerard M. Haizel, PP, AICP, Principal 

RE: PB-24-18 – 560 Northfield Avenue – Essex County Turtle Back Zoo
Block 163, Lot 1

DT: October 17, 2024

The following is prepared on behalf of the West Orange Planning Board. The information is for advisory purposes only and is intended to assist the Board's decision-making process. Below are descriptions of the projects based on the supplied plans and documentation as well as commentary on issues evident from them.

Items Reviewed

In preparation of this report, I have reviewed the following items:

- Township of West Orange Application Form for the Planning or Zoning Board of Adjustment dated September 13, 2024.
- Aerial Map for Komodo Dragon Exhibit and American Alligator Exhibit, Block 161, Lot 1, Township of West Orange, Essex County, New Jersey, consisting of one (1) sheet, dated 11-15-2019, prepared by Michael J. Piga, LLA of French & Parrello Associates.
- Conceptual Site Plan, Turtle Back Zoo Australian Outback, Essex County, New Jersey, consisting of one (1) sheet, dated 8-5-2024, prepared by French & Parrello Associates.
- Correspondence from Michael J. Piga, LLA of French & Parrello Associates to Township of West Orange, dated September 13, 2024, RE: Renovations to the Australian Outback Exhibit at Turtle Back Zoo, 560 Northfield Ave., West Orange, NJ 08086.

Project Summary

On property located in the Township's ***R-1 (One-Family Dwellings on 80,000 square foot lots) District***, the applicant, ***Essex County*** proposes to make renovations to an existing deck pathway system for the Australian Outback Exhibit at the Turtle Back Zoo. The proposed deck system will consist of a 10-foot-wide ADA-compliant ramp, a small observation deck area, a large concrete observation area and connections to different existing active areas.

Variances Required:

None. This application is before this 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.

Project Description

The subject site is located within the Turtle Back Zoo compound, which abuts the South Mountain Reservation and is located to the east of the intersection of Northfield Avenue and Pleasant Valley Way. The applicant proposes to make renovations to an existing deck pathway system for the Australian Outback Exhibit at the Turtle Back Zoo. This exhibit is located to the east of the main entry to the Zoo, on the eastern side of the compound.

The proposed deck system will consist of a 10-foot-wide ADA compliant ramp, a small observation deck area, a large concrete observation area and connections to different existing active areas. The decking will consist of a composite plank, and the handrails will be ADA compliant. Proposed ADA amenities will include ornamental benches, ornamental trash receptacles, chain link fencing, signage, a plaza area with space for vendors, two rustic shade canopies for the animals of the Australian Outback exhibit and increasing the gate entry into the existing prehistoric playground.

There will be multiple access points to the renovated deck pathway system. The pathway connects to the main pathway, the petting farm, the Australian Outback Aviary and the prehistoric playground. While guests are walking on the proposed deck system, they will have the opportunity to rest at the proposed concrete plaza and at the small deck area.

Site & Area Description

Street Address: 560 Northfield Avenue
Block & Lot: Block 163, Lot 1
Zoning District: R-1 District

Location Map



Location Map – The property in question is outlined in red on the Google aerial map above. The project site is located within the confines of the Turtle Back Zoo, which is located in the southern end of the Township, abutting the South Mountain Reservation. The Turtle Back Zoo compound is situated on the southern side of Northfield Avenue, east of the intersection with Pleasant Valley Way, and is part of the Essex County South Mountain Recreation Complex. To the north, across Northfield Avenue from the site are a mix of retail/commercial and residential uses.

Planning Considerations

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.

West Orange's most recent Master Plan Update was adopted in 2019. This Update provided an overview of changes to the Turtle back Zoo and adjacent County facilities since the 2010 Master Plan Update. The 2019 Update also noted the continued increased in attendance over the period.

The 2019 Master Plan Update noted in the **Plan Element Amendments, Section VII - Open Space and Recreation**, that Essex County has substantial open space in West Orange, and as such, *"...the County and Township need to continue to work together regarding the future use of these lands."* The Update went on to recognize that *"Essex County has made the Turtle Back Zoo and surrounding attractions into a major attraction, which is a resource for Township residents and visitors and an economic development engine for West Orange."*

However, the 2019 Update also noted that, *"... 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 Updated concluded that, *"... 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."*

Planner's Comments

The application currently before the Board proposes the upgrade and enhancement of existing facilities within the Turtle Back Zoo. It does not propose any expansion of the facility beyond its current area. As indicated above, the Township Master Plan recognizes the need for maintenance, upgrade and enhancements to the existing facility as a necessary part of its operations. As such, in my opinion, the proposed project is consistent with the stated goals and objectives of the Township's Master Plan.

Recommendations

1. None