



MEMORANDUM

TO: Township of West Orange Planning Board

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

RE: PB-24-20 – 560 Northfield Avenue – Essex County Turtle Back Zoo – Lemur Exhibit Block 163, Lot 1

DT: December 16, 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 November 15, 2024.
- Aerial Map for Lemur and Tortoise Exhibit, Block 161, Lot 1, Township of West Orange, Essex County, New Jersey, consisting of one (1) sheet, dated 11-15-2024, prepared by Michael J. Piga, LLA of French & Parrello Associates.
- Conceptual Site Plan for The Lemur Exhibit at Turtle Back Zoo, Essex County, New Jersey, consisting of one (1) sheet, dated 5-20-2024, prepared by French & Parrello Associates.
- Perspective View 1, 2 3 & 4 for The Lemur Exhibit at Turtle Back Zoo, Essex County, New Jersey, consisting of four (4) sheets, prepared by French & Parrello Associates.
- Correspondence from Michael J. Piga, LLA of French & Parrello Associates to Township of West Orange, dated November 15, 2024, RE: Lemur Exhibit at the 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 the existing Sealion exhibit which will include renovation of the exterior pool area, which will be renovated to house lemur and tortoises. This new space will allow the lemurs to move about and explore in a way that closely mirrors their natural habitat, with expansive climbing tree structures, rocky out crops, and open areas where they can roam and exhibit their natural behaviors.

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 recommendations 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 the existing Sealion exhibit that will include renovation to the exterior pool area, which will be renovated to house lemur and tortoises. This exhibit is located to the east of the main entry to the Zoo, to the north of the existing Touch Tank Exhibit.

The lemur area will be enclosed with a black oxidized stainless steel netting system. The existing observation areas will allow guests to enjoy the playful antics of the lemurs. Visitors will be able to watch them interact with the environment, whether they are leaping from faux vine to faux vine, lounging in the faux Madagascar themed tree, or engaging with other members of their troop.

Tortoises will also be incorporated into this exhibit, offering visitors a chance to get up close at the lower portion of the exhibit. Guests will be able to watch them explore their naturalistic habitat and learn about the important role tortoises play in their ecosystems from educational signage proposed around the exhibit area.

The existing faux thatch canopy area with raised planters will enhance the exhibit's aesthetic, while providing a relaxing space for visitors to rest and take in the scene. Ornamental benches and trash receptacles will strategically be placed to keep the area clean and comfortable for zoo-goers.

Additionally, the main building will have the façade renovated with new faux huts and a change in the aluminum siding color. The interior of the building will require minimal renovations to accommodate the new exhibit and will include the installation of new doors to the exhibit, fresh paint and reconfiguration of the den spaces.

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