



MEMORANDUM

TO: Township of West Orange Planning Board
FR: Gerard M. Haizel, PP, AICP, Principal 
RE: PB-25-06 – 560 Northfield Avenue – Essex County Turtle Back Zoo – Gibbons Exhibit Block 163, Lot 1
DT: July 29, 2025

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 June 27, 2025.
- Aerial Map for Renovation of the Gibbons Exhibit at Turtle Back Zoo, 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 for Gibbon Exhibit Renovation at the Turtle Back Zoo, Block 163, Lot 13, West Orange Township, Essex County, New Jersey, consisting of one (1) sheet, dated 5-17-2025, prepared by French & Parrello Associates.
- Correspondence from Michael J. Piga, LLA of French & Parrello Associates to Township of West Orange, dated July 2, 2025, RE: Renovations of the Gibbons 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 revitalize the popular Gibbons Exhibit

at the Turtle Back Zoo. The scope of work will include interior modifications to the existing viewing area, with new pathway paving, informational signage and fencing. Renovations to the existing building will also be done, including raising the rear portion of the roof, installation of new LED lighting to replace older fluorescent fixtures.

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 Gibbons Exhibit.

The proposed project will involve the installation of new brick pavers arranged in a basketweave pattern, a new glass wall, and updated glass panels for the existing viewing area, along with informational signage framed by bamboo fencing.

Inside the exhibit, two new three-tiered platforms for the gibbons will be introduced—one measuring 10-feet by 10-feet and the other 6-feet by 6-feet. Both platforms will rise 18-feet above the finished ground level, each topped with an Asian-inspired open-roof structure supported by a powder-coated metal frame. The current stainless steel oxidized netting will be replaced with a similar material. The landscaping will also be revitalized to improve the exhibit's aesthetics and offer visitors various vantage points to observe the gibbons.

Additionally, the existing interior gibbon habitat building will be extended at the rear, measuring 6-feet by 21-feet (approximately 125-SF), to provide extra den space and a training area. Renovations will include raising the rear portion of the roof, installing a new ceiling equipped with lighting and skylights, and adding new mesh panels and shift gates. The winter holding area will be upgraded with new LED lighting, replacing the older compact fluorescent fixtures.

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 revitalization/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