

TO: Township of West Orange Planning Board

FROM: Malvika Apte, PP, AICP, Township Consulting Planner
Megan Adam, AICP Candidate, Associate Planner

RE: 560 Northfield Avenue (Turtle Back Zoo)
Block 163, Lots 2 and 13
Courtesy Review for Proposed Hoofstock Barn

DATE: October 31, 2025

As requested, we have reviewed the following materials:

- Township of West Orange Planning Board Application, dated August 25, 2025, with an attached addendum outlining the property's previous applications to the Planning Board;
- Cover Letter for the Proposal, prepared by French & Parrello Associates, and dated August 29, 2025;
- Aerial Map for the Proposed Hoofstock Barn at the Turtle Back Zoo, prepared by French & Parrello Associates, and dated August 25, 2025;
- Conceptual Site Plan for the Proposed Hoofstock Barn at the Turtle Back Zoo, prepared by French & Parrello Associates, and dated May 17, 2025;
- Architectural Floor Plan and Rendering prepared by Comito Associates, P.C., undated; and
- Memorandum for the Proposed Hoofstock Barn at the Turtle Back Zoo, prepared by Zayibeth Carballo, PE, PLS, PP, CME, CFM, Township of West Orange Department of Engineering Director and Municipal Engineer, dated October 9, 2025.

Site Description

The subject property includes sections of the 77-acre Lot 2 and 23-acre Lot 13 of Block 163, which are owned by Essex County. Collectively, the property, located at 560 Northfield Avenue, contains approximately 2,265' of street frontage and is developed with buildings and habitats of the Essex County Turtle Back Zoo. The zoo also extends onto neighboring Lot 1 of Block 161. See the aerial map on page 3 of this memorandum, which outlines the lot boundaries.

The Turtle Back Zoo hosts a wide array of animal exhibits, including giraffes, penguins, lions, wallabies, jaguars, stingrays, and more. Attractions include a zoo train, carousel, and playground. Additional developments on Lot 13 include the Essex County South Mountain Recreation Complex, which hosts the Essex Skating Club of NJ and the NJ Devils Youth Hockey Club, as well as a parking deck for Essex County's Park 'N Ride system, and an education center affiliated with the Turtle Back Zoo. Sections of the subject

property which are not developed with buildings, parking lots, driveways, or pathways for the zoo remain unimproved.

The subject property is located within the R-1 District (One-family dwellings on 80,000 square foot lots) of the Township. West of the Orange Reservoir, also located on Lot 2 of Block 163, includes the Essex County Safari Mini Golf course and McLoone's Boathouse restaurant. The remaining County-owned sections of land south of Northfield Avenue are undeveloped and covered with a dense tree canopy.

Prior Property Submissions

The Essex County Turtle Back Zoo has presented several courtesy review applications to the Township's Planning Board in the past. The addendum provided by the applicant indicates that a total of 33 courtesy review applications for the zoo has been reviewed by the Planning Board to date. Further, the zoo has also presented technical site plan applications, which included constructing a new gibbon exhibit (PB 09-01C), a new perimeter fence (PB 06-01C), and the merge of two existing supporting buildings into a larger one (PB 04-17C).

Aerial of Subject Property



Project Overview

The applicant is proposing to construct a new timber barn within the existing “African Adventure” exhibit area, which is located in the southwestern corner of the Turtle Back Zoo. The overall footprint of the barn will measure approximately 5,000 square feet (52’ x 96’). In addition to the new barn, impervious improvements are proposed to form connections to the existing penguin habitat and emergency access/maintenance driveway. The conceptual site plan notes that the access between this roadway and the existing greenhouse area will be realigned, which extends the scope of the application onto Lot 13. The existing visitor viewing pavilion will not be altered as a result of the improvements.

To the south of the proposed barn will be a new off-exhibit area, which will contain one (1) of the two new animal paddocks, as well as new refuse containers. Each exterior paddock measures approximately 800 square feet in area. The off-exhibit area will create more space for vehicle access and for loading animals into the barn. Additionally, new 4-foot-tall rustic post and rail fencing will redefine the boundaries of the exhibit area for the animals. A series of newly constructed African reed grass shade canopies, as well as landscaping to resemble African species will be placed throughout the exhibit area.

The proposed barn will be one story, and includes six (6) stables, two (2) open arenas for the animals, distinct keeper and tamer zones, feeding rooms, and mechanical space, and storage space. A new access point to the barn and will be created for the staff along the eastern section of the exhibit, via a new staircase. This staircase will also provide access to the second new outdoor paddock for the animals. The provided rendering articulates the proposed wood barn structure with a pitched roof, wood accents, and dark finishes around the fenestration.

The conceptual site plan also denotes an underground detention and storm drainage basins, but it is unclear if these exist or are proposed based on the current application. Further, whether the modular block retaining wall exists or is proposed is also unclear.

Zoning

The subject property is in the R-1 Zoning District. As a public capital project pursuant to N.J.S.A. 40:55D-31(a), the applicant is before the Planning Board for a courtesy review for review and recommendation in conjunction with the Township’s Master Plan.

Planning Comments:

Conformance with the Township's Master Plan

1. The Township's 2019 Master Plan Update (Reexamination Report with Plan Element Amendments) notes 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" (p. 61). Further, "the Master Plan should continue to support economic development throughout the Township...Maintaining a balance between development and preservation remains a goal, given the limited amount of development land remaining in West Orange" (p. 15).
 - a. The application proposes to maintain the disturbed area within the boundary of the existing African Adventure exhibit, and within the perimeter of existing emergency access/maintenance driveway, thus conforming to the vision of the Master Plan.

General

2. This is a courtesy review of a site plan application, which is to be reviewed in conjunction with the Township's Master Plan, per N.J.A.C. 40:55D-31(a) The authority of the Planning Board in this case is only to provide comments and suggestions. The Board may review applications by public entities that involve the expenditure of public funds and make comments as appropriate.
3. The applicant should provide testimony to the Board about the proposed timing of the development.
4. The applicant is encouraged to revise the submitted plans to define the subject property as Block 163, Lots 2 and 13.

Impervious Improvements

5. The applicant shall confirm the total area of proposed impervious coverage for the application (i.e., includes the barn, paddocks, walkways, driveway extensions).
6. The applicant shall confirm whether the underground detention and storm drainage basins, as well as the modular block retaining wall, already exist or are proposed in relation to the exhibit upgrade.

Operations

7. The applicant shall speak to any proposed changes in relation to the collection and pickup of refuse from the exhibit area.
8. The applicant shall speak about any safety measures (e.g., locks, lighting, alarm systems) to be implemented within the new barn and surrounding off-exhibit area.