

Janelle Cornwell

From: David Bernheisel <dhbernheisel@gmail.com>
Sent: Friday, June 11, 2021 8:52 AM
To: Janelle Cornwell
Subject: Comments related to the new middle school

Dear Ms. Cornwell:

On May 7th , we submitted these comments in response to the City's request for public comment related to the new middle school. With the seating of the new City Council, we feared that there was a possibility that some of the comments may have gone astray. To guard against that unlikely happening, we are resubmitting our comments. Our apologies if this needlessly adds to the complex file as you prepare for the Council meeting.

Our thanks for your efforts to work this through to the best possible outcome for the City.

Dave & Mary Bernheisel
66 Sussex Drive

(302) 727-6500

Janelle Cornwell
Municipal Planning & Development Officer
City of Lewes

Dear Ms. Cornwell:

Overall, we applaud the architects and planners; they created a good plan for educating our elementary and middle school students in the available space. Unfortunately, they inherited a site with a history of being much more. Gradually, over the years the site has become a catch-all for a variety of other activities. Events such as 700 player lacrosse tournaments, youth football playoffs, farmer's market, staging of City parades, and more. have stressed the area and created a serious threat to public safety.

So, how do we accommodate the goal of educating the students and all of those other activities in the space? The answer is clear, it is impossible. The thing to do is go with the plan with a few tweaks and cut out, or severely restrict, those activities that are not compatible with the basic plan. Specifically, the sports fields should be limited to school recess and athletic practice sessions with minimal nonparticipant observers. The big events should migrate to CHHS where all of the restrictive factors which limit the site in question don't exist.

If we can do that, there are a few other minor points that warrant suggestions and clarification:

- Consistent with the need for public safety on heavily used city streets, Sussex Drive will require curbs and sidewalks on both sides all of the way to the entrance to Highland Acres. Curbs and sidewalks are imperative to clearing up the mess which naturally evolved out of the existing situation. Curbs and sidewalks, in addition to promoting public safety, will narrow the street and preclude on street parking. Given that the plan provides adequate parking for the projected activities, that will not be a public inconvenience.
- At the new middle school, the number of parent drop-offs & pick-ups will overwhelm the loop access road. The parents who don't fit into the loop will back up onto Sussex Drive and create the kind of

congestion, confusion, and public safety hazard that currently exists. This could be solved by switching the buses to the loop access off of Sussex and the parent drop-off to the Savannah Road entrance.

- The plan shows a path that runs between the Highland Acres fence and the baseball diamond's left field. It doesn't seem to serve any purpose given the foot traffic will be on the path that runs through the middle of the field. If there is a good reason to keep the path along the fence, there should be access to it from Sussex Drive where the path makes its right turn to follow the fence.
- The observation tower behind home plate on the softball field could be a nice addition. However, if it is in the final plan, the view into the neighbors yards & windows on the north side should be blocked.

Our thanks to all of the folks who have put so much effort into creating a plan which will clear up existing problems and serve the public well for years to come.

Respectfully submitted,
David & Mary Bernheisel
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June 10, 2021

Janelle Cornwell
Municipal Planning & Development Officer
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Introduction

These are comments that are being resubmitted for consideration by the new City of Lewes Council. They are the same issues that were presented to the City in 2014 for the “Highland Heights” Hearing. They are the same issues that were presented to the City in 2018 for the Shields/Lewes School Hearing. They are the same issues that were submitted following the first Middle School Hearing in May of this year. The safety and aesthetic issues of Sussex Drive, a City of Lewes residential street, remain the same year after year. It is with a sense of hope that we are hearing support for making Sussex Drive a NO PARKING zone from Savannah Road to Highland Acres. Let’s see that to completion, as well as all the other long overdue improvements.

Overview

The Lewes Middle School plans are both impressive and ambitious. This project does exist in an inner city setting surrounded by residential neighborhoods. As such, the real-life interface of humans and vehicles must guide the final design decisions. There is a well-documented history* available to support the right choices.

The Right Choices for the Middle School (and Associated) Project

1. Vehicular traffic must be routed off Sussex Drive
2. Existing Sussex Drive sidewalks that start at Savannah Road need to continue down Sussex Drive to the beginning of Highland Acres
3. Existing Sussex Drive curbs that start at Savannah Road need to continue down Sussex Drive to the beginning of Highland Acres
4. Existing Sussex Drive NO PARKING restrictions that start at Savannah Road need to continue down Sussex Drive to the beginning of Highland Acres
5. Existing residential landscaping that starts at Savannah Road needs to continue down Sussex Drive to the beginning of Highland Acres
6. Traffic enforcement that clusters around Savannah Road needs to continue down Sussex Drive to the beginning of Highland Acres
7. There should be no school or field night lighting

*See page 3 for reprinted “Comments” from 2018 Shields hearing

Discussion

Multiple Pressures on Sussex Drive

Sussex Drive is not only a residential City of Lewes street on which 53 houses reside, it also supports all the University of Delaware housing for the Lewes campus. In addition, the City placed a condition of approval on the development of Mariners' Retreat to incorporate a foot and bicycle path. Now Sussex Drive also hosts people walking, riding and leading dogs from all points on the New Road side of town to the Savannah side, and all points on the Savannah side of town to the New Road side. Sussex Drive is the alternate site for the Farmers' Market, it is where all the City parades are staged, and it is host to all the athletic events held on the school fields, to include regional La Cross tournaments. On this pinch of the hourglass arrives the new schools and upgraded athletic fields--all wonderful assets to the City of Lewes, and as such, they will be heavily used. The enjoyment of these resources for City residents comes at a cost and that cost should not be borne on the back of proximate neighborhoods without the best efforts of designers and City planning.

Vehicle/Bus entrances

In 2018 when the new Shields Elementary School plans were discussed at its hearing, many of us in Highland Acres submitted comments describing the "unsafe, dysfunctional, and unpleasant problems" that characterize Sussex Drive. Your decision to place the vehicle entrance to the new Shields school between the cemetery and the school, thereby substantially relieving pressure off Sussex Drive, was greatly applauded. We recommended a "mirror image" approach to the Middle School design which, at the hearing, was received as a good idea. To my great dismay, I see that this was not the approach taken. For the same safety reasons outlined in 2018 and the new ones introduced by the Middle School plans as presented, I urge you to "mirror image" the Shields traffic flow design for the Middle School limiting Sussex Drive vehicular traffic to buses only.

Middle School Parking Lot Entrance

From the drawings, the most direct access to the Middle School parking lots is from Savannah Road. For safety reasons, I urge you to make that the **ONLY** in and out for the Middle School parking facilities. During athletic field events with people parking in the Middle School parking lots, entering and exiting via Savannah Road is the only safe route. To use the Sussex Drive drop-off entrance, vehicular traffic would be driving directly over the pedestrian crosswalk where people will be trying to cross carrying chairs, coolers, sports equipment and children. Traffic will back up, people will get frustrated, and it's a formula for a terrible accident with running children and distracted adults. It is a short-sighted safety hazard design to route vehicular traffic over the only pedestrian crosswalk between the two points. The Savannah Road entrance is the only pedestrian-safe option for the Middle School's vehicular traffic.

Quantity of amenities vs infrastructure support

The school and consortium grounds are crammed full with athletic fields but there isn't sufficient proximate parking or space allocated for spectators. Living with these athletic fields for 20 years, I know that people arrive with coolers, chairs, athletic equipment, and children. Families use the opportunity of a sporting event to have a picnic and let the kids run around and have fun. Expecting people to haul their items and their children from distant parking areas will not only create frustration, it will lead to people finding inappropriate ways to solve this problem to their own individual satisfaction, at the expense of all other concerns, including safety. There will be far more enjoyment of these community resources if the needs of those using them are factored into design decisions. Perhaps one less athletic field should be planned, and instead use that space for centralized parking and spectator accommodations.

A side issue to spectator accommodations was mentioned at the May 3, 2021 hearing. A passing reference was made to some possible portable bleachers butted against Sussex Drive for seating. This is neither adequate nor appropriate. First, it will not provide adequate space for friends and families, and second, it is inappropriate to butt the back of bleachers onto a residential street. The school system and the City pledged to use the opportunity of these school construction projects to bring Sussex Drive into conformity with other City of Lewes residential streets and address the safety and aesthetic issues that have plagued our neighborhood. The backside of bleachers crammed into an inadequate space does not meet this promise.

***Review (from 2018) of the Problem Issues along Sussex Drive**

A dangerous and aesthetically unpleasant setting characterizes Sussex Drive between Savannah Road and the neighborhood of Highland Acres. During school hours and events of all description, cars can be found to be parked in a haphazard fashion, exceeding any reasonable density for both safety and neighborhood standards. Adults are distracted by the unloading of their belongings, communication via cell phone, and conversations with others gathering for the same activity. This creates the dangerous situation of temporarily unsupervised young children who are too small to be visible behind these parked cars to drivers on Sussex Drive. It is frightening when these excited children suddenly dart between cars to cross the street. Drivers on Sussex Drive must run a gauntlet of car doors swinging and left open and piles of chairs and coolers left in the road by people who are unaware of ongoing 2-way traffic. While navigating this maze, drivers on Sussex Drive must also watch for children and distracted adults emerging suddenly from the sidelines, rarely looking right or left for oncoming cars. This type of dangerous behavior is not limited to market days or special events. When parents pick up and drop off their children for school, they don't look to see if cars are coming from, or continuing on to Highland Acres. They pull out and Sussex Drive drivers are left to avoid collisions. People can also be found along Sussex Drive using their cars as "phone booths," sitting in the seat and leaving the car door open into traffic for the entire duration of their conversation, oblivious to cars trying to get past their open doors while avoiding oncoming traffic.

***Hardscape and Landscape as Information**

Aesthetics both instruct and greatly influence behavior. Hardscape elements such as curbs and sidewalks will indicate where cars are permitted and where they are not. Of course, adequate parking facilities must be available. Crosswalks that flow from sidewalks will instruct both pedestrians and drivers where safety zones are and how to manage crossing expectations. A boulevard approach with a planted median could provide a strong calming message. Good landscape elements will communicate that the area is cared for and that people and neighborhoods are part of the setting.

Summary Conclusion

1. Vehicular traffic must be routed off Sussex Drive
2. Hardscape traffic-informing structures such as curbs and sidewalks as well as residential landscaping that start at Savannah Road must continue down Sussex Drive to Highland Acres
3. NO PARKING restrictions that start at Savannah Road must continue down Sussex Drive to Highland Acres
4. Appropriate vehicular traffic issues that are policed at Savannah Road must continue down Sussex Drive to Highland Acres
5. Residential-appropriate Lights Out at dark must be the rule for the schools and parking lots

Respectfully submitted,

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