

Main Line Times > News

New request filed for St. Joe's ball fields

Thursday, June 18, 2009

By Cheryl Allison

St. Joseph's University has taken the second step in its response to Lower Merion Township's decision that it needs more zoning relief to upgrade ball fields on its new Maguire Campus in Merion.

The first step came in April, when the university filed an appeal of the zoning-hearing-board decision in the Montgomery County Court of Common Pleas.

Last week it also filed a new application with the township for special-exception approval of the playing-field improvements. A first hearing date on the request has been set for July 23.

After the zoning board ruled in March largely in favor of Merion neighbors' appeal that the university's plans to upgrade fields on the former Episcopal Academy campus exceeded zoning approvals St. Joseph's received in 2006, the school had announced that it would pursue those plans with a two-pronged approach. It would appeal the decision in court but would also apply for the zoning relief — realistically, probably a shorter course of action.

At issue are plans, revealed when the university submitted land-development applications to the township last summer, for improvements intended to bring some of the old high-school fields up to NCAA standards for intercollegiate play. Those improvements include a new permanent public-address system, larger bleachers with dugouts and press boxes, and artificial turf.

In lengthy hearings throughout the winter, the Merion Community Coalition, a group representing about 400 households in Merion and Bala Cynwyd, argued that the plans were a departure from what the university had told the zoning board when it was reaching an agreement with Episcopal to buy its campus.

What it had said then, neighbors argued and the zoning board ultimately agreed, was that the use of the campus would remain essentially the same: classrooms and athletic fields.

The university responded that use of the fields for intercollegiate play, requiring some upgrades, was implicit in the approval.

But the board found that the proposed improvements represent an expansion of the educational use and thus require additional approval as a special exception under the property's residential zoning.

In a June 10 letter to township zoning officer Michael Wylie, university attorney Michael Sklaroff requests any "special-exception relief deemed necessary by the board to permit the playing-field improvements."

The relief requested includes approval for all of the items mentioned above as well as erection of retaining walls and installation of poles and netting — plans show a permanent netting system with 35-foot-tall poles — to prevent balls from flying out of the baseball field onto adjoining Latches Lane.

Sklaroff writes in the letter that the requested relief should be granted because the playing-field improvements "are permitted by special exception" and "are integral to, and represent the implementation of, the Campus Approval [of 2006], which granted

permission to use the playing fields for intercollegiate and intramural use without condition.”

“The impact of the playing-field improvements, if any, will not pose a substantial threat to the health and safety of the community,” Sklaroff also states.

Included with the letter is a “statement of use” describing proposed activities on the fields, the likely times of practices and games, and the numbers of student athletes and spectators who might be expected to participate.

According to those estimates, about 200-220 student athletes and staff, including opposing teams, would use the fields on weekdays, with activities occurring between noon and sunset.

On weekends about 130-140 athletes and staff would use the fields between 9 a.m. and sunset.

For intercollegiate games, spectator attendance would range from about 30 to 400 people, depending on the event. Spectator attendance for intramural games would be “minimal.”

In addition, the statement of use indicates that the fields would continue to be used for other community athletic events, such as summer camps for non-university students. Those activities would take place during daylight hours.

“Here we go again,” was the response of a spokesman for the community group after reviewing the letter and in particular the statement of use.

Dr. Lauren Wylonis, a co-director of the Merion Community Coalition, noted that in its application, the university is again seeking full use of the previously proposed field improvements.

After the zoning board's decision in March, Wylonis said that she and fellow MCC director Betsy Goldmuntz had met with university president Father Timothy Lannon and several other university administrators. The university had asked the group to outline its major concerns with the Maguire Campus plans, Wylonis said. Those concerns included use of the public-address systems, the intensity of use of the fields, traffic management and parking, drainage issues relating to the use of artificial turf, and the baseball-field netting.

Addressing a top concern, the neighbors had asked the university to set up a demonstration of the sound system. “If there really was no issue, we would support that,” Wylonis said. The university declined.

Neighbors had also asked the school to consider limiting use of the fields in the early morning and after 6 p.m. “We tried to understand what SJU needed... while at the same time not disrupt the quality of life in a residential neighborhood.”

“However, in response, SJU has decided that — as a good neighbor — they would request usage that results in the maximum noise, traffic and intensity of use possible,” Wylonis said.

“It is sad, because the solution is not that hard,” she added. “The neighbors feel sorry that SJU is punishing its own students — who could have used the fields last year if SJU could work with the township and the neighbors to make some small constructive changes.”

“Instead,” Wylonis said, “SJU has basically backed the neighbors into a corner and forced them to oppose the plan in toto — because there are no other options at this time.”

URL: http://www.mainlinemedianews.com/articles/2009/06/20/main_line_times/news/doc4a391cbe921d8587883241.prt

© 2009 mainlinemedianews.com, a **Journal Register** Property