

BUCKINGHAM TOWNSHIP

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PLANNING COMMISSION

AGENDA

DECEMBER 7, 2022

Call to Order 7:30 p.m.

1. Consideration of approving draft Planning Commission minutes of October 11, 2022.
2. Pre-Submission Sketch Plan:
Review of "Con-Solatio", 1-Lot, TMP 06-018-071, 12.01 acres, in the AG-1 Zoning District, Proposing to use existing structures on the property, without increasing the size of any structure, for Cottage Development or Private Camp (E18) use.

Buckingham Township Planning Commission
Meeting Minutes

The regular meeting of the Buckingham Township Planning Commission was held December 7, 2022 in the Township Building, 4613 Hughesian Drive, Buckingham, Pennsylvania.

Present:	Andrea Mehling	Chairperson
	Patrick Fowles	Vice Chairperson
	Erling Salvesen, Jr.	Member
	Dr. Marc Sandberg	Member
	Louis Spadafora	Member
	Glenn Thomson	Member
	Dan Gray	Township Engineer
	Jeremy Stoff	Bucks County Planning Commission

Not Present: Rebecca Fink Member

Mrs. Mehling called the regular meeting to order at 7:30 p.m.

Consideration of approving the draft Planning Commission minutes of October 11, 2022.

Mrs. Mehling made a motion, seconded by Dr. Sandberg, to approve, as most recently presented, the draft Planning Commission meeting minutes of October 11, 2022. The motion carried unanimously.

Pre-Submission Sketch Plan: Review of “Con-Solatio”, 1-Lot, TMP 06-018-071, 12.01 acres, in the AG-1 Zoning District, proposing to use existing structures on the property, without increasing the size of any structure, for Cottage Development or Private Camp (E18) use.

Richard Kempes, Esq., Mr. Scott Mill, Van Cleef Engineering Associates and Father Alexandre Morard were present to discuss the sketch plan.

Mr. Kempes explained that Con-Solatio is a 501c3 organization affiliated with the roman catholic church, with its main office based in Brooklyn, NY. He said their mission is to minister to the poorest of the poor in Brooklyn and provide contact with less fortunate people.

Mr. Kempes said that Con-Solatio has contracted the purchase of a 12-acre tract along Forest Grove Road, containing a house, barn, carriage house and other outbuildings, and is located in the AG-1 zoning district.

Mr. Kempes explained that Con-Solatio proposes to use the property as a retreat for their staff to come to a quiet setting and decompress as their ministry is often stressful. He said there are 15-20 persons on staff, and they would all plan to stay at the site together once a month, with the other weekends occupied by only 6 persons. He said twice a year they may have as many as 30 persons, with 15 of them coming only for the day and the other 15 staying overnight.

Mr. Kempes said that the agreement of sale is contingent on the seller receiving approval for a revised septic or new septic system, as the existing system does not work. He said plans have been

submitted to the Bucks County Department of Health, showing 7 permitted bedrooms in the main house, plus 9 separate bedrooms in the other buildings. Mr. Kempes said under the ordinance, a private camp or retreat use can have up to 2 cottages per acre on a site, so on 12 acres they could potentially have 6 cottages total. He explained at this time they are proposing to use the existing residence and carriage house, and possibly the barn in the future although it has no sanitary sewer and would require the township amending the Act 537 plan and approval by the Bucks County Department of Health.

Mr. Kempes said as shown on the plan, parking is calculated at the required 1.25 spaces per cottage, so with 3 cottages proposed they are planning on 4 parking spaces. However, he questioned if they have a day of training, but persons are not using the cottages, what type of parking that would require.

Mr. Kempes said the zoning officer noted the township has no records as to sanitary sewage facilities in the carriage house, but does have records for the main residence. He said obviously the facilities are present, but they do not know when they were installed as there are no records on file. Mr. Kempes said they do plan to connect both the carriage house and the main residence to a newly constructed sewage facility on the property.

Mrs. Mehling asked if any other facilities on the property were compatible for living/sleeping. Mr. Kempes said perhaps the barn; however, it would need significant work, and the zoning officer and fire marshal said they would need to complete the land development process to convert the building. Father Morard said they will not be making changes to the barn at this point.

Mrs. Mehling asked how many persons the house can accommodate, i.e., the number of bedrooms. Mr. Kempes said he believed there are 4 bedrooms in the main house, with several in the carriage house. He said the zoning ordinance requires compliance with the sewage requirements for the township and county, which are based on the number of bedrooms.

Mrs. Mehling asked how they planned to accommodate 15 persons, and Mr. Kempes replied that not everyone would get their own bedroom. He said if they double or triple up, they could fit 15 persons. Mr. Kempes said the proposed sanitary sewage system is designed for 7 bedrooms.

Mr. Thomson questioned how they would manage 30 persons and shared concerns on parking, saying it sounded like scope creep, where a huge impervious surface would be installed to accommodate a growing number of persons. Mr. Kempes said the church just sold a 127 acre parcel in Sullivan, NY which was previously used for a retreat, and wanted to downsize to a smaller facility. He said this property is ideal for their scope. Mr. Thomson said it may potentially be too small.

Mr. Kempes confirmed that there are 4 types of uses proposed, explaining that over 35 weekends in a year, there will only be 6 people on site; 1 time monthly those 6 persons will be joined by up to another 9 maximum; 2 times yearly there will be training sessions with up to 20 persons; with never more than 15 persons overnight on the site; and there will also be daily retreats up to 30 people maximum, with only 15 persons staying overnight.

Mr. Gray asked if there would be weekend or single day retreats, and Father Morard replied that when they have 30 persons for one day, they can leave and come back the next day but only 15 persons may stay overnight.

Mrs. Mehling asked if trailers would be brought in for persons to stay in, and Mr. Gray replied that recreational vehicles are prohibited from use for the Cottage Development or Private Camp Use, as outlined in the Zoning Ordinance, including travel trailers and mobile homes.

Mrs. Mehling asked if there would be permanent caretaker on the property, and Father Morard said no, that he will be the caretaker and will travel back and forth from Brooklyn, but will not be staying on the property all week long as he works in Brooklyn. Mr. Kempes clarified that nobody except a full time caretaker may stay there more than 120 days a year; and nobody will be staying there. He said lawnmowing and snowplowing will be contracted. Mr. Kempes said the use is seasonal, and the facility will not be used from July through the 2nd week of September and the month of February. Mrs. Mehling asked if there would be adequate security as the property will be an abandoned area, and Father Morard said there would be cameras and a security system.

Mr. Thomson asked how 30 persons would get to the property if there is not adequate parking, and Mr. Kempes said they would probably carpool or take a bus to Doylestown. He said they do not bring people by bus or travel trailers. Mr. Kempes said if parking is a concern, they could provide it onsite, but preferred to keep the property as it is now. He said they also do not want to add onto the existing buildings.

Dr. Sandberg asked if there is a minimum number of bathrooms required for 30 persons. Mr. Gray asked if the septic was filed as residential or the equivalent to 7 bedrooms, and Mr. Kempes replied it was filed as a residential permit. Mr. Kempes said if they decide to buy the property, they may need to permit and build a different type of system, such as one analyzed for park or camp use as opposed to residential use. He said they would make sure the Bucks County Department of Health permits apply with the use. Mr. Gray asked if the 7 bedroom permit was filed on their behalf, and Mr. Kempes said the agreement of sale provided that the seller would get a permit for a 7 bedroom facility on the property. Mr. Gray asked if they were confident that 7 bedrooms was equivalent to the park usage number, i.e., gallons per day, etc., and Mr. Kempes said they hired Penn Trails to design an appropriate system for their use. Mr. Gray said he was concerned if there was enough land suitable for disposal of the amount of treated effluent.

Mrs. Mehling said she hoped there would not be port-a-pots, and Mr. Kempes said no, that he understood there was a history with the property and that type of use, and if the system could not be tweaked to handle the number of persons, then they just would not have that many people on site. Mr. Kempes said they could provide opportunities for the volunteers to come at certain times, and they may need to rotate.

Mr. Gray noted with the change in use they may need to make some structural changes for ADA, and that by having this venue with multiple persons sleeping in the buildings, sprinklers may be required. Mr. Kempes said this was explained to them by the building department.

Mrs. Mehling asked if they would need a professional style kitchen and Mr. Gray said they would need to be code compliant depending on the activities held on the property.

Mrs. Mehling asked what the neighbors would hear and see when they held their retreats. Father Morard said the purpose of the retreat is to move out from the stress of the city and mission, and have silence and prayer time. He explained with only 6 persons onsite most weekends, they would enjoy the silence and calm, and pray, relax, enjoy the property, read and eat.

Mr. Spadafora asked if they would have lighting and sound systems, and Father Morard replied no, that they are not coming to do worship, they don't want to build a church or have a concert. Mr. Kempes confirmed no sport fields, tennis, basketball, nothing requiring lights or sound? Father Morard replied "no".

Mr. Gray asked if they would be installing prayer gardens, site amenities, more structures, anything to make it look different. Father Morard said no.

Mr. Spadafora asked if they would have any signage, and Father Morard said no, they want to keep it a quiet private spot for the volunteers and members of the Brooklyn committee.

Mr. Spadafora asked if they intended to bring those they serve to this property, and Father Morard said no, they had that experience on the former property and it was not good for them. He said they are bringing persons from their work to a place of rest and to distance from the work reality and take strength to return.

Mr. Salvesen said that the proposal sounded acceptable to him, and as long as they are aware that changes may need to occur depending on the number of persons/situations, then he did not see a problem.

Mr. Jeremy Stoff representing the Bucks County Planning Commission said that his comments had been addressed and he had nothing further.

Mrs. Mehling said that due to the location, people were nervous about exactly what was coming in, and asked if the audience had questions.

Mr. Jim Zeek, Forest Grove Road, asked if there would be a zoning change required. Mr. Gray said there would not be a change in the zoning, but there would be a change of use from one permitted use to another permitted use. Mr. Gray said the applicant would be required to submit a land development plan with the township and go through the regular process of showing all of the proposed improvements on the plan, the township consultants would review and provide input on the plan and make sure the concerns are adequately addressed along with any community concerns, and the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisor's would review the plan.

Mr. Thomson asked from a benchmark perspective, is there anything else like this in Buckingham Township, and Mr. Gray replied there is nothing as specific as this. Mr. Thomson said he was concerned about the image of the township, the long range vision of Buckingham, the environment of what we are. Mr. Thomson shared the concern of creating a retreat that too many people will

love and want to come to. Mr. Kempes said they know they must be very specific about the future use of this property and not create a problem of growth, neighbors complaining about noise or masses of people. Mr. Kempes said they will be sensitive to the conditions.

Mr. Gray explained this is a permitted use in this zoning district, and the vision is outlined in the zoning ordinance and comprehensive plan which determined this zoning type is where cottage development and private camps are appropriate. Mr. Gray said the township would make sure through the plan approvals that the maximum capacity does not get exceeded.

Mr. Zeek said that while they know the persons who will be on the property are missionaries and do good work, they will not know them as they know their full-time neighbors.

Ms. Jill McManus, Forest Grove Road, said her property borders Briarwood Day Camp, and while she has no problem with Briarwood, she does not want to see another Briarwood in front of her property. She had concern about not knowing who would be on the property, and does not want people coming onto her property. Father Morard said they have had the same people working together for 15 years, and that the 6 persons who would be there most weekends would be the same 6 people, and then they would welcome the other volunteers who work with them. Father Morard said they want to know the neighbors, to exchange telephone numbers and work together and have a relationship. Father Morard said not living at the property all the time, they would also value the neighbors watching out for their property.

Mr. Bill Swank, Forest Grove Road, asked if there would be a sign at the end of the drive, and Father Morard said maybe only the name of the property, but they wanted to keep the location quiet and low key in that aspect. Mr. Kempes said if there was a sign it would be in compliance with township requirements, would not be internally lit and would be very small, if at all.

Mr. Joe McManus, Forest Grove Road, asked for clarification on the zoning as far as camping and cottage, and Mr. Gray read the specific requirements and description for a Cottage Development or Private Camp Use from the zoning ordinance. Mr. Gray said the applicant had met with the township Zoning Officer who confirmed this use aligns with the zoning district.

Mr. McManus said he understands they intend to keep the existing structures, but asked if they will be adding onto them in the future. Mr. Kempes said they would need to go through the township procedures if they ever decided to make a change. Mr. McManus asked what “scope creep” is as used by Mr. Thomson previously, and Mr. Gray explained that it is when you say what the scope of work will be and it changes incrementally over time.

Mr. Gray explained the development process, that the applicant first would receive input from the township staff, Bucks County Planning Commission and township consultants, then if moving forward they would submit a Land Development Plan which will lay out everything being proposed at this time. He said if they want something more, they would need to go through the entire process again to verify compliance with township ordinances. Mr. Gray said everyone has the ability to question what is submitted during the Land Development process, adding that what they are proposing now is what could receive approval. Mr. Gray said the township cannot restrict the property from being sold and having a different use later on.

Dr. Sandberg asked then theoretically, would it would be legal to increase the number of buildings on the property. Mr. Gray said they would need to submit another Land Development application and go through the township review process to increase the number of buildings or to make a significant building improvement that changes the use of the property. He said they would need to comply with zoning requirements in effect at the time.

Mr. Gray noted one requirement of a land development is the landscaping buffer to protect adjacent properties. He said sometimes a full buffer is appropriate, and sometimes not, depending on the scale of the development and the ordinance. Ms. Manicone, Buckingham Township Landscape Review Consultant, noted that there would be buffer requirements, with existing vegetation contributing and new vegetation planted to protect the neighbors.

Mr. Swank said his biggest concern is not knowing who is coming and going.

Mr. Zeek asked how does the township monitor the number of persons on the property, and Mr. Gray said by receiving calls and reports from the neighbors, and if the township investigates and there is a violation, the zoning officer issues a citation.

Mr. Kempes concluded once they file the Land Development application, it will be reviewed by the township experts with the township requirements, and discuss in an open transparent process. Mrs. Mehling confirmed that the neighbors would be notified when a Land Development plan submission is made and scheduled for review by the Planning Commission and the Board of Supervisors.

Mr. Kempes, Father Morard and the residents thanked the Planning Commission for their comments and feedback.

Mrs. Mehling made a motion, seconded by Mr. Spadafora, to adjourn the Planning Commission meeting at 8:25 p.m. The motion carried unanimously.

Minutes respectfully submitted by Lori Wicen.

Minutes approved by Planning Commission on February 1, 2023.