

**NORMAN PLANNING COMMISSION
REGULAR SESSION MINUTES**

FEBRUARY 14, 2019

The Planning Commission of the City of Norman, Cleveland County, State of Oklahoma, met in Regular Session in the Council Chambers of the Norman Municipal Building, 201 West Gray Street, on the 14th day of February, 2019. Notice and agenda of the meeting were posted at the Norman Municipal Building and online at <http://www.normanok.gov/content/boards-commissions> at least twenty-four hours prior to the beginning of the meeting.

Vice Chair Tom Knotts called the meeting to order at 6:33 p.m.

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Item No. 1, being:

ROLL CALL

MEMBERS PRESENT

Sandy Bahan
Nouman Jan
Chris Lewis
Tom Knotts
Steven McDaniel

MEMBERS ABSENT

Neil Robinson
Lark Zink
Dave Boeck
Erin Williford

A quorum was present.

STAFF MEMBERS PRESENT

Jane Hudson, Interim Director, Planning &
Community Development
Anais Starr, Planner II
Roné Tromble, Recording Secretary
David Riesland, Traffic Engineer
Ken Danner, Subdivision Development
Manager
Terry Floyd, Development Coordinator
Beth Muckala, Asst. City Attorney
Bryce Holland, Multimedia Specialist

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Item No. 7, being:

O-1819-29 – CHILDREN'S HOUSE MONTESSORI SCHOOL (KRISTEN HILL, DIRECTOR) REQUESTS SPECIAL USE FOR A SCHOOL FOR PROPERTY CURRENTLY ZONED R-1, SINGLE FAMILY DWELLING DISTRICT, AND LOCATED AT 2323 CLASSEN BOULEVARD.

ITEMS SUBMITTED FOR THE RECORD:

1. Location Map
2. Staff Report
3. Aerial Photo
4. Pre-Development Summary

PRESENTATION BY STAFF:

1. Jane Hudson reviewed the staff report, a copy of which is filed with the minutes. Staff supports this request for Special Use and recommends approval of Ordinance No. O-1819-29.

PRESENTATION BY THE APPLICANT:

1. Sherry Jackson, Chair of the Board of Directors for Children's House Montessori School – Kristen Hill could not be here this evening; she's actually on her way to Colorado to complete an additional piece of her certification. We like to get as many certifications and as much training for our educators as we can. I'm here just to spend a few minutes to tell you about who we are and why this space means so much to us, and then answer any questions you might have about who we are.

What is Montessori education? Did anybody here attend Children's House Montessori School? Or have you ever been familiar with a Montessori program? I'm going to tell you a little bit about what it is. I wasn't until my daughter went there. My daughter started Children's House Montessori when she was 3 and she just recently completed 5th grade there, and is now in 6th grade at Alcott Middle School and doing terrific. So I'm proud of the Montessori program we put together. Maria Montessori believed no human is educated by another person. She must do it for herself or it doesn't ever get done. A truly educated individual continues long after the hours and years she spends in the classroom, because she's motivated from within by a natural curiosity and a love for knowledge. Dr. Montessori felt, however, the goal of early childhood education should not be to fill the child's mind with facts from a pre-selected course of study, but rather to cultivate her natural curiosity and desire to learn. Our highly specialized faculty and staff recognize a child's sensitive periods for learning and seize the child's curiosity. Children's House Montessori School provides a non-competitive atmosphere for learning, which, in turn, builds a deep community within. You're seeing on the slide show some of the materials that we use in early childhood education; we have areas ranging from practical life, early mathematical concepts, science, tools. A Montessori classroom is a very specialized play space for a kid, because it's really all about play and activating their curiosity for learning.

These are our current buildings that we've been living in since 1971, when Children's House opened its first classroom, which was actually inside St. John's Episcopal Church. As it grew and got larger, it allowed us to begin renting the small white houses that are also owned by St. John's on that block, the Linn Street and Santa Fe buildings that we have been occupying since 1971. A few years ago, when we began the project to build an elementary program, we moved back inside the St. John's building for that portion of the school, and we have reached capacity. We can't operate in that space much longer; we need a space to put that program and to allow these kids to have the space they need to function and the play space outside they need to be able to move around and do what they need to do to grow.

Our Primary Program, in two classrooms, is 3 years old through kindergarten. It's currently home to 40 3-6 year olds with a 1:10 teacher/student ratio. Teachers at CMS have a minimum of a bachelor's degree; many hold advanced degrees, ranging from master's degrees in Montessori education, philosophy, to Ph.D.s in music composition and environmental toxicology. The lead teachers in all of the classrooms have been through the AMS certification program and that is a part of our pathway to becoming an AMS (American Montessori Society) certified

school. Our teachers absolutely share the love of learning for themselves. We have a very passionate group of educators.

Our Elementary Program is currently home to 35 students from 1st through 5th grade, at a ratio of 1:8. The tuition at Children's House ranges from \$650 a month to \$740 a month, depending on which program you're participating in and length of day. Some students are half day, only in the primary program; elementary is a full day program, five days a week. We currently have a waiting list of 56 families that would like to join our program. These families are interested at all levels of programming; many of them are primary, looking for a solid preschool environment. Some of them are elementary. But we do tend to fill our elementary from the primary program. Those are parents that have enjoyed the Montessori method through kindergarten and would like to continue that through elementary school. This property would allow us to accommodate that wait list by opening a third primary classroom that would feed into a second lower elementary classroom, and then ultimately to the one upper elementary classroom that we've got going. I think that would be our dream goal, that we can take care of that. It does a couple of things for us: it allows us to be more financially stable. We are currently solidly running this school with a sizeable savings account, and we are cash positive in all ways in our school. But the sustainability of this school is definitely going to increase exponentially if we can have that third primary classroom that allows us some sustainability for the upper levels. Attrition happens. Most people are going to leave the Montessori primary and go to public education. We are big supporters of public education. But a third primary classroom allows us to ensure that our lower elementary and upper elementary programs stay full, so that we can sustain those.

Each level of classroom at CMS is comprised of a multi-age three year building curriculum. Families who choose CMS choose a three-year minimum commitment, with most choosing to stay through upper elementary if they go on beyond the primary classroom. I've loved watching what kids do in a three-year classroom, because when you've got students that are older and younger than you in a classroom, it activates not only their inner educator, but their inner learner as well. They learn how to cooperate and operate at their own pace without the pressure of needing to be absolutely on par with everybody next to them. There are learning spaces for kids. Not every 5 year old is ready to read a full book; some absolutely are. Some are still tangling with those letters, trying to figure out what they all do, and this creates a space where everybody gets to flourish.

Our Upper Elementary – I'm terribly proud of what we've built – has two to five to three hour uninterrupted work cycle in the day. In a Montessori classroom, uninterrupted work cycle we believe is critical to the building of concentration and skill. During this time, individual and group lessons are given and students are able to explore the environment, collaborate, revisit lessons, and further their mastery of skill. It was my great pleasure – my undergraduate degree is in theoretical mathematics, and it was my great pleasure to watch these kids spend a couple of hours on the floor with the tools that they had, after being given a lesson by their teacher, without really knowing what they were doing, derive the formula for area of a square and a circle and figure it out on their own and come to those conclusions and know what that was. My daughter has graduated Montessori 5th grade and is now in 6th grade taking pre-algebra and making straight A's and doing really excellent work. I'm super proud of her as a student and a human. 'Cause the other thing that it provides is, when they're working together, there's a huge focus on conflict resolution, being able to solve problems among your peers and work collaboratively on a project at an executive level, because you're deciding what project to undertake, what your timeline is on completing it, and getting that done with your classmates.

These are a few of the photos of 47 years of community at Children's House Montessori. I was just talking to Grady earlier – there's not a place I go in town, and I work with the Norman Music Festival and the Depot and work in the arts in downtown Norman, and I run across people all the time who have had their kids come through this school as a primary school, or who went through it themselves, and they all have terribly fond memories and remember what it was like to be in this space. We couldn't be more thrilled to be thinking about having a launch pad and a place that we can build, call our own, that gives us an asset that would anchor this school

and make sure it's got another 47 years in it. And that's our current year with all of our teachers and our kids.

There's our proposed forever home. What we really love about being able to take over this space is we couldn't believe that we found a space that kept us so close to Core Norman. One of the things that we've really enjoyed with our students is them spending lunch times at the Fred Jones Museum, listening to classical musicians or people play, letting them go to the library and check out books for research or work that they're doing, and keeping us as a part of Core Norman really anchors this group of people as people that will grow up loving and understanding what their community is about, and being able to be a part of it. It allows us to create community garden space, playground space, soccer fields outside, and accommodate additional classrooms and more interactivity between the classrooms. Currently we've got two little buildings, one space inside the school, and that keeps them sort of segregated from each other during the day, and a space like this would allow them to really interact and become a community. And lots of trees and space for them to run that we don't have currently on Campus Corner. And a playground and community space that would be there and available.

Montessori loves integrating things into nature and be able to make things arise out of nature that make sense for kids to play with and be a part of, and these are some of the ideas when we put our wish board together. These are some of the things we'd like to see built on that space.

And this, if I can get the video to work – maybe I can; maybe I can't. Look, there it is. We were working on a community garden this year and this is about 45 seconds of our kids at work. Thanks. We're really proud of what we've built. We hope you see fit to approve the zoning change so that we can move to a forever home. Can I answer any questions for you?

2. Mr. Knotts – Are you buying this new home?

Ms. Jackson – Yes. What we really love about this space – what makes this space so attractive to us is that, with the money that we've got in a savings account – well, even if we didn't – even if we just purchased it outright, we have money for the down payment. We can purchase this outright, and the mortgage payment on this space is less than we're currently paying in rent. It makes it a very sustainable choice for us.

3. Mr. Lewis – I see that expansion is in the horizon. Do you have a timeline or a timeframe of when you think that might occur?

Ms. Jackson – So if we are able to purchase this building and get it rezoned for a school, we will probably stay put where we are for at least another year while we go through a fund-raising round so that we can pay for any expansion we would like to do up front. We've already started that work in anticipation of whatever forever home we land in. I'm hoping that within the next year to year and a half we would be able to get that construction taken care of.

Mr. Lewis – So then that would occur before you actually move in?

Ms. Jackson – These are the questions that we discuss now. Like, can part of us move into the existing space? Would part of us stay behind? Would that be too distracting to separate us? We've also talked about being able to occupy the space and modify the work that we do. But really, if I'm just speaking off the cuff, my best case scenario is that we would be able to afford to let the kids stay in the space they understand while we completed some improvements to that building. There are obviously some things that we would need to alter right away to make it suitable for the kids. We need more stalls in the bathroom for kids. There are just some functional pieces that we would need to take care of before we're able to put kids in this building.

Mr. Lewis – And just one last question. I would assume you have an engineering design architect in place that is going to work with the traffic flow, egress, ingress, as well as the expansion of the parking lot and parking areas.

Ms. Jackson – Yes. Absolutely. I was about to say we couldn't be more lucky to have builders, architects, and planners all as parents in our school. So we have a team of people that is working with us on the traffic flow. We've been able to work the traffic flow in the small St.

John's parking lot since 1971 and with the growth of our elementary school without impacting the surrounding streets on Campus Corner, without creating lines or any traffic hazards. We feel confident – what we loved about this space when we saw it is, if you see when you turn off the main road to the side road, there's a turn into the parking lot and a drive through to the main building. So there's a lot of space on the property to be able to handle traffic flow and with that egress. We've talked about, if we see that our primary program grows and we're hitting a spot where we've got an extra primary class and that's creating a traffic problem, we can stagger start times in the morning for each of those classrooms to make sure we eliminate that for the neighborhood.

Mr. Lewis – So that kind of answers a question for me. Do you have the plans already in place – are they already drawn?

Ms. Jackson – For the building?

Mr. Lewis – For the expansion.

Ms. Jackson – This opportunity came along so quickly that we felt we had to leap on it. So we have some preliminary dreams, but do we have schematics exactly what we want to do? No, not yet. That would be the next step. We didn't really want to incur the costs of getting architectural plans drawn up before we knew whether or not this was going to be the space. We wanted to be wise stewards of the money that we have.

Mr. Lewis – Just being transparent, you brought up the concern that I have. Because when I looked at this space, I immediately thought, you're absolutely right. You have an arterial road, you have an ingress, an egress, because you drive around the building and have good traffic flow. There's not going to be a bottleneck and kids aren't going to have to be dropped off on Classen Boulevard and walk across the greenspace. But then when I saw the expansion, which you're asking for the rezoning with the expansion in mind, but we're not seeing what the expansion is, and how this parking lot is affected with the ingress and egress – that's my concern.

Ms. Jackson – I got it. I do understand that, and that is something that we've talked about. When we talked about the expansion, the existing structure has a couple of classrooms on the inside that we can utilize. It's got a main space, but we would need some additional spaces to be able to operate in. So expanding that building to make that work – and our discussions have been which way do we expand the parking lot, because we would need to increase that space. Although that's not in that drawing, that is one of the things that we've talked about doing is expanding our parking space and making sure that whatever expansion we do doesn't leave us in a space – we're going to have parents that want to come to Parent Night and we're going to need a place for them to park without working on surrounding streets and things like that. So that is definitely a part of our consideration.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION:

None

DISCUSSION AND ACTION BY THE PLANNING COMMISSION:

1. Mr. Lewis – I have a question for the Traffic Engineer, or maybe to Jane. When property is rezoned in the current plat, or the current form, and I know that any time we change that property, it has to be brought up to code. Would there be, other than just the number of parking spaces for the occupants in the building – would there be requirements of reclassifying the speed zones on Classen? Would there be requirements of ingress/egress in regards to the traffic flow around this building – to maintain where it's not dumped out into Louise Boulevard and into the neighborhood of Donna Drive?

Mr. Riesland – We could entertain a school zone with beacons around the school. Kind of the first I've heard of this, to be honest with you. Generally those are reserved for those locations where kids are going to be crossing the street. If they're dropped off, it's looked at slightly different. We could also entertain static signs that post the time when school is going to be in session.

Mr. Lewis – Again, I'll bring up my main concern. Where I see the ingress and egress, we're not dumping traffic into the neighborhood, like we have in some other areas where

schools are, and I see a nice traffic flow in from Classen Boulevard, down Lois Street, around the building, and back out onto Classen. If that building is expanded, and I know there's plans to improve the parking lot and which way it will go is up in the air, what I'm just wondering is do we have a City guideline or an ordinance that would require that parking lot to be expanded, or can they abut right up to the edge of it where it does impede that circular traffic flow?

Mr. Riesland – I'm not aware of anything that would.

Ms. Hudson – So are you asking can they construct the building up to the existing edge of the parking lot?

Mr. Lewis – Parking lot. Where my concern lies is where you see the traffic flow of the picture, it's nice; you come in, you can drive around the entire building, and you can go out. It's a circular motion, kind of like what we had on Main Street when we approved that school. That was our big concern was the traffic jam, because during University time, Classen is packed 35-40 miles an hour with students going to or from class. If you're going to impact an entire lane there, we're going to have issues. But if you have someone coming in, especially when we have people from 3 years old, maybe even lower, up through 5th grade, you're going to need a second to drop them off in a safe place away from traffic, and then you continue on back out onto Classen Boulevard, and we really don't have a bottleneck. I'm wondering if, when that building is expanded, which it shows – I understand that there is plans to expand that parking lot, but how do we ensure there's still that continuity of traffic flow. It's kind of like we're getting the cart before the horse here. Because we don't have plans of the actual expansion that's going to occur.

Ms. Hudson – When that application comes in for expansion, it would be reviewed for everything you're talking about. We would look to see how they're going to route the cars. We could actually ask them for a traffic plan when they bring the application in.

Mr. Lewis – Would that come back through Planning Commission?

Ms. Hudson – No. It would just be reviewed through the building permit.

Chris Lewis moved to recommend adoption of Ordinance No. O-1718-29 to City Council. Tom Knotts seconded the motion.

There being no further discussion, a vote on the motion was taken with the following result:

YEAS	Sandy Bahan, Nouman Jan, Chris Lewis, Tom Knotts, Steven McDaniel
NAYES	None
MEMBERS ABSENT	Neil Robinson, Lark Zink, Dave Boeck, Erin Williford

Ms. Tromble announced that the motion, to recommend adoption of Ordinance No. O-1819-29 to City Council, passed by a vote of 5-0.

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