

August 18, 2018

Thomas West
Planning & Development Officer
City of Lewes
114 E. Third Street
Lewes, Delaware 19958

Dear Tom,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Shields-Lewes School site development plan.

Overview

I consider my comments "supplemental" to those filed by Sally Boswell who, better than I could ever hope to do, addressed our whole-hearted support for the development project along with a broad range of suggestions for community-centered improvements.

Outline of Comments

My supplemental comments are more narrowly focused on the experience of Sussex Drive, an examination of its unsafe, dysfunctional, and unpleasant problems, and consideration of how we all might use the opportunity of the plans for the two new/restored schools flanking Sussex Drive to fix this heavily used but neglected Lewes community location.

Review of the Problem Issues of 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.

Why Sussex Drive?

This would never happen on any other street in the City of Lewes, so why is it a continual and worsening situation on Sussex Drive? The presence of the schools and their fields is not the problem, but rather it's their lack of integration into the community, their lack of planning for traffic flow and enforcement, and their inadequate provisions for the surge use of their resources that lies at the heart of the answer to that question.

Description of Sussex Drive Flaws

If you walk Sussex Drive from Savannah Road, the answer gradually reveals itself. Sussex Drive starts as a very wide street with curbs, sidewalks, landscaping, and an extremely limited amount of permissible curb-side parking. Then, suddenly, the curbs end, the road dramatically narrows, one side's sidewalk disappears, and the sidewalk that remains falls rapidly into disrepair. You suddenly enter a confusing, undefined twilight zone of parking lots and fields with no indication that you are still on a 2-way city street and that a residential neighborhood lies ahead. At this point Sussex Drive has become a lawless no-man's land--a wide space of "nothing" between parking lots and fields. It's ugly too. A loading dock area with dumpsters... Mismatched permanent and temporary storage structures are scattered on both sides... Broken, cracked walkways that peter out to dirt and gravel... Rusted and bowed chain link fencing running for awhile, stopping, and mysteriously starting again a bit later, unjoined, unrelated, and offset in a completely different plane... Rutted dirt areas dug out by tires along the side of the street where weeds have staked their claim... There's some extra asphalt on one side where buses have suddenly begun permanent parking... Where grass field used to be, a few years ago trucks dumped loads of gravel which people have decided makes for good, close-in event parking... That was all the suggestion others needed to drive their vehicles all the way across the field to the other side and randomly park along the way. There's no consideration of the implication of mixing these vehicles bouncing across the fields and the small children and distracted athletes engaged in the activities for which these fields have been staked. For the rest, if you can't find room to park on the field, that wide area between the schools and the fields is the next closest area and vehicles jam in every which-way, backing up, pulling out, stopping suddenly, unloading, turning around, kids are running to meeting their friends and get where they're going... This is Sussex Drive as you approach our neighborhood of Highland Acres.

Schools, Fields, Neighborhoods and Safe Roads are Compatible

I don't believe that two schools, athletic fields, a residential neighborhood, and a safe 2-way street are incompatible. Recognizing that Sussex Drive, which runs down the center of Shields and The Lewes School, is a City of Lewes street on which a neighborhood of families has their homes and is the road upon which we all must safely travel needs to be a prominent concept of any school redevelopment plans. Planning, good design, adequate accessible parking lots, land- and hard-scape structures that provide guidance to appropriate vehicle and crossing behavior, and event permitting rules that call for shuttle service for overflow event parking will harmonize all these community elements that share this space.

School Plan Proposal Highlight

The plan presented for the renovation of The Lewes School brilliantly pulls most of its traffic off Sussex Drive and reroutes it to the East side of the campus. This redesign element will greatly assist the work of redefining Sussex Drive into a safe 2-way street with reasonable parking and integration into the residential Lewes neighborhood of Highland Acres.

Hardscape and Landscape as Information

Aesthetics both instruct and greatly influence behavior. Hardscape elements such as curbs will indicate where cars are permitted and where they are not. Of course, adequate parking facilities must be available. Crosswalks and 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. Locating "underbelly" necessities such as dumpsters, storage, maintenance vehicles, etc. should take into consideration what residents and visitors experience passing along Sussex Drive between Highland Acres and Savannah Road.

Closing Suggestion for Next Phase

I would like to close these supplemental comments with a simple planning suggestion for the new Middle School phase of the project. Traffic-wise, the two schools should be planned as reciprocal mirror-images of each other. Sussex Drive needs to be reclaimed by the City of Lewes as one of its safe and aesthetically characteristic residential streets. Designing the move of school and field traffic off Sussex Drive to the far East and West sides of the two schools' campuses adjacent to a commercial building and a cemetery will do more than any expensive landscape and hardscape elements to mitigate the problems discussed in these comments. The renovation and replacement of these two schools are a wonderful opportunity for the City of Lewes to beautify and improve a significant asset of the community. It is perfect timing for the City of Lewes to reclaim and harmonize with the renaissance of Highland Acres and create one more area jewel for all the Lewes community to enjoy.

Summary Bullets

- Sussex Drive is a dangerous and aesthetically unpleasant area
- The issues that plague Sussex Drive are not due to the mix of so many elements, but rather due to the lack of planning, lack of integration, and lack of management of events
- Examples abound of how a neglected area slides into unsightly dysfunction
- The current proposal to move most traffic off Sussex Drive is an enormous step toward addressing many of the outlined problems
- Hardscape and landscape elements both inform and influence behavior and should be used liberally
- The two-school project should be planned as one concept with traffic removed from one central point of concentration, Sussex Drive, and instead mirror-image moved to the outside perimeter of each school's campus
- Reclaiming Sussex Drive and the neighborhood of Highland Acres in conjunction with a well thought out plan to renovate/replace two schools and their fields is an exceptional opportunity for the city and community of Lewes

Respectfully,

Norma Morrison
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cc: Theodore W. Becker, Mayor
Ann Marie Townshend, City Manager
Phillip Moore, Planner, City of Lewes