

The logo of Lower Merion School District is circular with a red border. Inside the border, the words "LOWER MERION" are at the top and "SCHOOL DISTRICT" is at the bottom. In the center, there is a shield with the Latin motto "MENTI VERI MORIBUS" and the word "FAS" below it.

Lower Merion School District

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May 22, 2020

Dear Comm. Churchill,

The Lower Merion Board of School Directors is in receipt of your recent “Open Letter” (attached) regarding our application to extend the use of modular classrooms at Penn Wynne Elementary School while the new middle school is being constructed. There are parts of your letter that are somewhat confusing to us. Extending the time for the modular classrooms until the new middle school is completed and they are no longer needed should be a simple and practical decision. If the extension is not granted, the children of your constituents will be forced to crowd into limited classroom space, at a time when that poses a significant health risk, in addition to negatively impacting the quality of the education they will receive. Families in the Lower Merion School District have made it very clear that small class sizes are a top priority. And never more so than now, when maintaining social distance can be a life-or-death necessity.

You state that you would be “very uncomfortable” approving the extension for the modular classrooms while the School District is in violation of the parking requirements under the Zoning Code. We are not sure what would be causing your discomfort, since the School District has submitted not one, not two, but three separate Tentative Sketch Applications to the Township (#3862TS, #3863TS/CU and #3864TS/CU) to address the alleged parking deficiency. Each of these applications provides an option to address the issue in a different fashion and with a different approach.

And, to be clear, let’s define what the parking requirements are. Under both the previous and current Zoning Codes, LMSD would be required to construct 50 (not 39) additional paved parking spaces at Penn Wynne ES. We must point out that the “very easy win-win solution” of constructing any number fewer than 50 spaces would require approval from the Zoning Hearing Board and conditional use approval from the Board of Commissioners to put some number of spaces in reserve. Not to mention that the School District has numerous concerns about the practical usage, historical impact and effect on the natural environment of locating those spaces along Haverford Road. To us, that doesn’t appear to be as “very easy” a solution as it does to you.

We are also confused by what you mean when you state the District has a “vision of turning Penn Wynne Elementary School into an inner-city school.” Cynwyd Elementary, which like Penn Wynne is located in our suburban District, has less green space per student than Penn Wynne, so it seems you are not referring to green space. There is no intent to move the school into an urban center, so, perhaps you could explain that reference in more detail.

We appreciate your acknowledgment that LMSD is unhappy with the Zoning Code that was recently finalized. Under its regulations, LMSD’s current staffing and enrollment would require nearly three parking spaces for each employee in the entire District, the amount of impervious coverage available

to LMSD is reduced by hundreds of thousands of square feet and private developers are given a higher impervious coverage limit than LMSD in certain districts. Back in February, LMSD clearly documented these deficiencies to Township staff. The Township has not responded.

Thank you for your offer of coffee. We, of course, must decline that offer as we are all under a stay-at-home order. The “virtual coffees” we shared with Comm. Bernheim on April 28, with you on May 13, and with Comm. Bernheim again on May 21 were not as productive as we had hoped. Still, the District remains amenable to a real discussion about the various options we have presented for parking under the Township zoning code, your holding adequate classroom space hostage to force through a particular plan that you may prefer, at the expense of vulnerable young children, is what makes us “very uncomfortable.”

Yours truly,
Dr. Melissa R. Gilbert
President, Lower Merion Board of School Directors