



**ALBEMARLE COUNTY PLANNING**  
**STAFF REPORT SUMMARY**

<b>Proposal:</b> SP202100002 St. John Family Life and Fitness Center	<b>Staff:</b> Mariah Gleason, Senior Planner
<b>Planning Commission Public Hearing:</b> May 18, 2021	<b>Board of Supervisors Hearing:</b> TBD
<b>Owner:</b> St Johns Baptist Church, Trustee C/O Natalie Butler	<b>Applicant:</b> Jody Lahendro (Project Architect); Rebecca Kinney (St. John Family Life & Fitness Center Board President)
<b>Acreage:</b> 6.10 acres	<b>Special Use Permit for:</b> Community center use under Zoning Ordinance 18-10.2.2.1
<b>TMP:</b> 06600-00-00-07800 <b>Location:</b> 1569 St John Road, Gordonsville, VA 22942	<b>By-right use:</b> RA Rural Area - agricultural, forestal, and fishery uses; residential density (0.5 unit/acre in development lots)
<b>Magisterial District:</b> Rivanna	<b>Conditions:</b> Yes <b>EC:</b> No
<b>Proposal:</b> Request for a community center use. The community center will occupy an existing, historic 1,500 square foot building on a 6.10-acre parcel that also contains a church and cemetery.	<b>Requested # of Dwelling Units:</b> None
<b>DA:</b> <b>RA: X</b>	<b>Comp. Plan Designation:</b> Rural Area – preserve and protect agricultural, forestal, open space, and natural, historic and scenic resources; residential (0.5 unit/ acre in development lots)
<b>Character of Property:</b> The prominent building on this parcel is St. John Baptist Church which lies directly along St. John Road. Parking for the church is relegated to the sides, with the primary parking lot surrounding an existing, historic building that is to be renovated for the proposed community center use. Behind the buildings and parking area is a gently sloping mowed field. A portion of the mowed area directly behind the church contains a cemetery. The rear of the property is wooded.	<b>Use of Surrounding Properties:</b> Surrounding properties are also zoned for Rural Area uses. Most, if not all, of the properties are developed as rural area residences that are primarily one- to two-stories in height, set back from the road, and contain wooded areas. Properties across the street also consist of agricultural pasture/field areas.
<b>Factors Favorable:</b> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The restoration and preservation of a historically and culturally significant local building.</li> <li>2. The proposed use will be a publicly-accessible educational resource, both in illuminating history and in its ongoing provision of spaces, resources, and opportunities for learning.</li> <li>3. The proposed use will provide services and support to rural area residents.</li> <li>4. The proposed use is not anticipated to create substantial detriment to adjacent properties.</li> </ol>	<b>Factors Unfavorable:</b> None Identified

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>5. The proposed use is consistent with the character of the nearby area.</li> <li>6. The proposed use is compatible with adjacent uses in this area.</li> <li>7. The proposed use is consistent with the purpose and intent of the Rural Area zoning district.</li> <li>8. The minor increase in expected traffic as a result of the proposed use will not adversely impact traffic in the area.</li> </ol>	
<p><b>Recommendation:</b> Staff recommends approval of SP202100002 St. John Family Life and Fitness Center with conditions.</p>	

**STAFF PERSON:** Mariah Gleason, Senior Planner  
**PLANNING COMMISSION:** May 18, 2021  
**BOARD OF SUPERVISORS:** TBD

**PETITION:**

PROJECT: SP202100002 St. John Family Life and Fitness Center

MAGISTERIAL DISTRICT: Rivanna

TAX MAP/PARCEL: 06600000007800

LOCATION: 1569 St John Rd, Gordonsville, VA, 22942

PROPOSAL: Special Use Permit request for a community center use. The community center will occupy an existing, historic 1,500 square foot building on a 6.10 acre parcel that also contains a church and cemetery.

PETITION: Community center use allowed by special use permit under Section 10.2.2.1 of the Zoning Ordinance. No new dwelling units proposed.

ZONING: RA Rural Area - agricultural, forestal, and fishery uses; residential density (0.5 unit/acre in development lots)

OVERLAY DISTRICT(S): None

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN: Rural Area – preserve and protect agricultural, forestal, open space, and natural, historic and scenic resources; residential (0.5 unit/ acre in development lots)

**CHARACTER OF SURROUNDING AREA:**

Surrounding properties are also zoned for Rural Area uses. Most, if not all, of the properties are developed as rural area residences that are primarily one- to two-stories in height, set back from the road, and contain wooded areas. Properties across the street, along the western side of St. John Road, also consist of agricultural pasture/field areas. Attachment A provides an aerial map of the subject property and surrounding area.

**PLANNING AND ZONING HISTORY:**

- VA199900004 St. John's Baptist Church – Variance
  - The variance allowed the reduction of the front setback on TMP 66-78 from 75 feet to 25 feet to accommodate additions proposed by SP199900005, not all of which were approved.
- SP199900005 St. John's Baptist Church – Special Use Permit
  - On April 21, 1998, the Board of Supervisors approved, with conditions, a special use permit to allow an approximately 516 square foot addition to the rear of the church building to accommodate a bathroom and an expansion to the dining hall and pastor's study for the existing congregation.
- SP200300041 St. John Baptist Church Amendment (Addition) – Special Use Permit
  - On August 6, 2003, the Board of Supervisors approved, with conditions, a special use permit allowing an expansion to the existing church building. The proposal included an Application Plan for a 4,775 square foot expansion to the existing 2,875 square foot church building. The expansion consisted of the addition of two classrooms, four bathrooms, and a new 3,192 square foot, 175-seat sanctuary.  
\*Note: One of the conditions of approval for the special use permit specified that parcels TMP 66-78 (St. John Baptist Church parcel) and TMP 66-77 (historic school building parcel) and would be combined into a single parcel.
- SDP200300071 St. John Baptist Church Site Plan Waiver – Final Site Plan
  - The site plan for parcels TMP 66-78 and TMP 66-77, which are now a single parcel (TMP 66-78), was approved on October 23, 2003. The property was subsequently developed in accordance with the final approved site plan.
- Subdivision Plat (DB 2642 PG 378)

- In November 2003, the County approved a vacation plat that combined Tax Map 66 Parcels 77 & 78 into one parcel.

### **DETAILS OF THE PROPOSAL:**

The applicant for this special use permit request represents St. John Family Life and Fitness Center, Inc (SJFLFC). The applicant is requesting approval to restore and adaptively reuse an existing, historic school building on the parcel as a publicly accessible community center. See Attachment 2 for the Application Narrative.

The aforementioned building was constructed around 1923 and is a one-story frame building approximately 1,500 square feet in size. The applicant seeks to renovate the building to preserve and share its history as a Rosenwald-funded school for rural African American students at a time when schools were still segregated. The applicant also plans for the building to offer family, fitness, and education amenities to local community members. The Application Narrative states that the renovated space will include multiple meeting spaces and rooms for groups, classes, and lectures/workshops, an exercise room, and a display room with amenities such as a museum, library, and computer.

### **COMMUNITY MEETING:**

In light of COVID-19, community input on this project was solicited through several means including phone, email, and a virtual community meeting held via Zoom. The virtual community meeting was held on March 24, 2021. Over 60 surrounding property owners were invited by mailed letters to participate. The meeting was attended by a total of 11 participants. A recording of the virtual community meeting is available via the County calendar and Albemarle County's YouTube account.

Community comments and questions during the meeting included: interest in whether signage about the history of the Rosenwald school building would be included on the site or within the building, the proposed kitchen utility, and questions around the project's timeline and funding. Overall, attendees voiced support for the proposed community center use. One comment from a surrounding neighbor was received by phone prior to the community meeting. The comment was in regards to the intensity of the proposed community center use now and in the future, and whether the proposed use could result in an incompatible intensity of use within the context of the surrounding area.

### **ANALYSIS OF THE SPECIAL USE PERMIT REQUEST:**

Special Use Permits are evaluated under reasonable standards, based on zoning principles which includes the proposal's compliance with the Comprehensive Plan. Any impacts caused by the proposal may be addressed through conditions and those conditions must be reasonably related and roughly proportional to the impacts.

***Section 33.39(B) states that the Commission, in making its recommendation, shall consider the same factors found in Section 33.40 (B):***

- 1. No substantial detriment. Whether the proposed special use will be a substantial detriment to adjacent parcels.***

Changes to the building and site to accommodate the proposed community center use are shown in the Plan Exhibits provided by the Applicant in Attachment 3. As demonstrated by the exhibits, the proposal largely consists of interior changes to the existing, historic school building, with minimal changes to the exterior and site or character thereof. Recommended

Condition #1 will limit the size of the proposed use to the existing structure to ensure that the intensity of the use on the site does not become incompatible or detrimental to adjacent parcels. Recommended Condition #4 will also ensure that a buffer between abutting residential uses and the proposed community center use is maintained. Please note, the later condition is one that was also applied to the approval of SP200300041. Approval of this condition in the context of the current proposal would work to carry it forward.

In addition, staff find that there are no significant traffic concerns generated by the proposed use. Transportation Planning staff estimate that the addition of the community center use will generate 34 daily vehicular trips. In which case, no changes are needed to the existing parking area. However, to ensure that the addition of this use does not conflict with existing church uses on the property and that adequate parking is provided for both, staff recommend Condition #2 which limits the days of operation of the proposed use to Monday through Saturday. This condition aligns with the hours of operation described in the Application Narrative (Attachment 2).

With these conditions, staff does not find that substantial detriment to adjacent properties or uses will be created with the approval of the proposed community center use.

**2. Character of the nearby area is unchanged. Whether the character of the adjacent parcels and the nearby area will be changed by the proposed special use.**

In addition to the findings discussed in Factor #1 above, staff find that 1,500 square foot, one-story frame building the community center use is proposing to occupy is physically compatible with surrounding buildings in the area. Therefore, the proposed use is not expected to change the visual character of the nearby area.

Staff recognize that offering a concentration of amenities in a rural area setting could result in the site becoming more prominent within the local community. However, staff find this potential outcome to be supportive of Rural Area goals identified in the Comprehensive Plan. Please see the analysis provided under Factor #4, below. In addition, the inherent scaling of the proposed community service uses, given the small size of the intended building, will make it small enough to not act as a driver for more dense residential development on nearby parcels or surrounding rural areas.

**3. Harmony. Whether the proposed special use will be in harmony with the purpose and intent of this chapter,**

Albemarle County Code states that purpose and intent of the Rural Area (RA) zoning district is the preservation of agricultural and forestal lands and activities; water supply protection; limited service delivery to the rural areas; and conservation of natural, scenic, and historic resources. The applicant's proposal to considerately restore, preserve, and adaptively reuse the historic school building as a publicly accessible resource without adversely impacting rural area resources is in harmony with the purpose and intent of this chapter.

**...with the uses permitted by right in the district,**

The subject property and surrounding adjacent properties are zoned Rural Areas. The proposed community center use will not adversely impact by-right uses in the district.

**...with the regulations provided in Section 5 as applicable,**

The proposed community center use is not seeking public funding from Albemarle County. Therefore, it is not subject to the supplementary regulations contained in Section 5.1.04.

**...and with the public health, safety, and general welfare.**

Fire/Rescue and Engineering approval of the proposed use will be required within the site plan process and approval from the Health Department and Building Official will be required as part of the building permit process.

The Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT), in their review of the proposed community center use, asked the applicant to provide additional information regarding the design of the existing site entrance. While County staff typically defer to VDOT on transportation-related aspects, VDOT approval is not required for special use permit approval. In this case, County staff believe the existing site entrance, which was reviewed and approved in 2003, is sufficient for the addition of the proposed use.

Therefore, staff find that the proposed use will not be a detriment to public health, safety, or general welfare.

**4. Consistency with the Comprehensive Plan. Whether the proposed special use will be consistent with the Comprehensive Plan.**

The Rural Area Chapter (Chapter 7) of the Comprehensive Plan designates this parcel, TMP 66-78, for Rural Area land uses. The intent of the Rural Area designation is to preserve and protect agricultural, forestal, open space, and natural, historic, and scenic resources. Staff find the proposed community center use to be consistent with the intent of Rural Areas in that it will: support historic preservation and associated tourism, not remove land from the agricultural and forestal economy, be compatible with surrounding uses, and provide services and support to rural area residents and the local community without fostering growth and further suburbanization of the Rural Areas.

The proposed community center use was also analyzed against the Historic, Cultural, and Scenic Resources Chapter (Chapter 5) of the Comprehensive Plan due to the integral nature of the use's proposed adaptive reuse of a historic building, a former Rosenwald School. In comparing this aspect of the proposal against the Comprehensive Plan, staff find that the proposal is consistent with the goals of this chapter. Specifically, the proposal contributes to the respectful restoration and preservation of a culturally significant resource in Albemarle County. In addition, renovations and proposed activities will also allow the culturally and architecturally historic building to be publicly accessible and an educational resource for the greater community with implications for promoting tourism.

For these reasons, staff find the proposed use consistent the Comprehensive Plan and offer Condition #3 to ensure that this historically significant resource is preserved and protected.

**SUMMARY:**

Staff finds the following factors favorable to this request:

1. The restoration and preservation of a historically and culturally significant local building.
2. The proposed use will be a publicly-accessible educational resource, both in illuminating history and in its ongoing provision of spaces, resources, and opportunities for learning.
3. The proposed use will provide services and support to rural area residents.
4. The proposed use is not anticipated to create substantial detriment to adjacent properties.
5. The proposed use is consistent with the character of the nearby area.
6. The proposed use is compatible with adjacent uses in this area.
7. The proposed use is consistent with the purpose and intent of the Rural Area zoning district.

8. The minor increase in expected traffic as a result of the proposed use will not adversely impact traffic in the area.

Staff did not identify any unfavorable factors to this application.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:**

Based on the findings contained in this staff report, staff recommends approval of SP202100002 with the following conditions:

**CONDITIONS:**

1. Development of the use must be in general accord (as determined by the Director of Planning and the Zoning Administrator) with the exhibit identified on Sheet CD-1 of Attachment 3 with a red box and initialed MBG 5/3/2021. To be in general accord with the exhibit, development must reflect the following essential major elements:
  - Location of the building and structuresMinor modifications to the plan which do not conflict with the elements above may be made to ensure compliance with the Zoning Ordinance.
2. Days of operation for the community center use are restricted to Monday through Saturday.
3. Changes to the building associated with the community center use must not result in the delisting from the National Register of Historic Places or the Virginia State Register.
4. The existing trees on the south property line adjacent to TMP 66-76 between the building associated with the community center use and St. John Road must be retained. Tree protection measures, subject to the approval of the Director of Planning, shall be employed during construction.

**ATTACHMENTS**

**Attachment 1** – [Vicinity Map](#)

**Attachment 2** – [Application Narrative](#)

**Attachment 3** – [Plan Exhibits provided by the Applicant](#)