

**SPECIAL USE PERMIT**  
**St. JOHN FAMILY LIFE AND FITNESS CENTER**

## **NARRATIVE**

### **PROJECT PROPOSAL**

Public Need or Benefits: St. John Family Life and Fitness Center, Inc, (SJFLFC), an approved IRS status, non-profit established in 2011, was organized for the purpose of encouraging understanding about the early education for African American in the segregated South. Our main goal is to provide community-based learning programs and activities to improve health, learning and personal well-being to participants. After completion of restoration of the historic Rosenwald School, our future home, it will be the only Rosenwald School in Albemarle County that will be available to the public. Like other communities around the United States, our desire is to preserve this surviving structure because of the deep meaning it carries for African Americans as symbols of a community dedication to education. This tool that was once used to segregate mankind will be now used to unify mankind.

The programs offered will be available to anyone wishing to exercise, attend classes or workshops. In addition, you will be able to spend time in our resource library or walk down memory lane in our museum and experience the environment of learning from the African American community during that time. Rental space will also be available upon request. It will also serve as a hub for the community to shower and utilize during power outages.

The St. John Rosenwald School is an incredibly unique part of the community. Not all communities have this type of story to tell. Our story is also being shared through Albemarle County school field trips, visits from the Carter G. Woodson Institute for African American Studies at the University of Virginia and intern students from Jefferson School. Out of the seven Rosenwald schools built in Albemarle County, this will be the only one that will be available for public use. Three are privately owned residences, two has been demolished, and two are vacant. So few Rosenwald Schools remain that in 2002 the National Trust for Historic Preservation listed them among its “most endangered places.” St. John School received approval for a Virginia State Highway marker in 2016 and was listed on the State and National Registers of Historic Places in 2019. The rich history of the struggle for African Americans to receive an education in the South is a legacy that must be preserved and told.

SJFLFC’s anticipated hours of operations and normal number of users are as follows:

- Open 6 days a week – Monday thru Saturday
- Operating hours: 12pm to 8pm (additional hours as requested)
- Anticipated average number of occupants during normal usage: 20 to 40
- Maximum number of occupants during normal operation: 75
- Peek week usage during normal operations estimated at 280 people visits
- Maximum of 2 volunteer employees

These hours will not conflict with church operating hours which are:

- Church services: 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday: 9am to 10:30am  
2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday: 11:30am to 1:30pm  
Sunday School: 10:30am to 11:30am
- Church congregational meetings are held once a quarter for three hours.
- There are four choirs that meet once a week for two hours.
- The Church peak weekly usage is estimated at 535. Sanctuary capacity is 160.

The proposed facility will include the following:

- 1 catering kitchen (limited to warming food only)
- 1 small meeting lounge
- 2 large multi-purpose meeting rooms separated by a folding partition
- 1 office
- 1 meeting and display room (museum, library, computer, and artifacts displays)
- 1 exercise room to include 1 home gym/weight bench & weights, 1 treadmill (fold up), 1 tread climber, 1 elliptical, 1 exercise bike
- 1 full bath (handicapped accessible)
- 1 toilet
- 1 shower
- 1 handicap ramp

Handicapped Accessibility: The proposed SJFLFC will be made handicapped accessible by adding a wheelchair accessible ramp attached to one of the two principal public entrances. The ramp shall be designed to be compatible with the historic building, as approved by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. An accessible route will be created connecting the ramp and entrance to two handicapped parking spaces 34' directly in front of the accessible entrance in the existing parking lot.

Parking Availability: SJFLFC will utilize the approved existing parking lot available to the church. Since our hours will not conflict with each other, the only change will be two spaces in front of the Center to be designated as handicap spaces.

Zoning Compatibility: Current zoning for the subject parcel is Rural Areas District (RA). Some of the by right uses allowed include single family residences, country stores, family day homes, group homes, farm brewery uses, and religious assembly uses. As a modest sized (1,500 GSF), one story frame building on a three-acre parcel, the former St. John School is physically compatible with existing rural structures. Compared to by right uses in this zoning district, the reuse of this historic building as a community center provides a compatible and much needed support for current local residents. Providing family and fitness services for local residents fosters community stability and connectedness. Additionally, the restoration and educational interpretation of this cultural landmark will promote the health, safety and general welfare of the public.

## **CONSISTENCY WITH COMPREHENSIVE PLAN**

Rural Area: The Comprehensive Plan for Albemarle County, adopted in 2015, designates the subject parcel's land use as Rural Area. The proposed renovation and adaptive reuse of St. John School conforms with Rural Area objectives 1 and 3.

Rural Area, Objective 1: Support a strong agricultural and forestal economy: The family, fitness and educational uses proposed for St. John School are designed to serve local residents. From 1923 to 1954, the school educated African American students in the Cobham and Gordonsville area from families that worked in the local economy, which was and remains primarily agricultural. The families of many of these former students continue to live in this area of Albemarle County, working in the local economy. Adaptively reusing the vacant school building as a community center returns this historic landmark in the landscape to vital public support of local residents. Currently, there is no community service facility in the Cobham community or this area of Albemarle County.

Rural Area, Objective 3: Protect the County's historic, archaeological, and cultural resources: The proposed St. John Family Life and Fitness Center will occupy the historic St. John's School, a Rosenwald Fund building constructed specifically for the education of rural African Americans. As stated in its 2018 National Register Nomination (see attached documentation): "The St. John School served African American students in the Cobham and Gordonsville area of Albemarle County from its opening in 1923 until it closed in 1954, making it locally significant ... in the areas of Education and Ethnic Heritage: African American. Today it is fondly remembered through the rich oral history tradition from the school's many alumni... its significance is derived from its architectural, educational, and historical significance for the African-American community in Gordonsville and Cobham." While the building was repurposed as a residence from 1954 to 2003, recent research has discovered that nearly 90% of its interior original finishes and features are extant, hidden by inappropriate later alterations. The proposed adaptive reuse will re-expose original finishes, reestablish original classroom spaces, restore the north original entrance and vestibule, and restore the folding partition wall that originally separated the two classrooms. The main exterior change will be the addition of an accessible ramp at the south primary entrance. This ramp and all proposed renovations will comply with the Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for Rehabilitation*, as regulated and approved by the Virginia Department of Historic Resources. In summary, objective 3 is achieved by: A) restoring this certified historic resource and community landmark, and; B) returning to active public service a vacant, deteriorated building that has been part of the historic landscape since 1923.

Historic, Cultural, and Scenic Resources (HCSR): By the very nature of preserving and adaptively reusing a certified historic resource, it is believed this proposed project is consistent with several objectives in chapter 5 of the Comprehensive Plan.

HCSR, Objective 2: Pursue additional protection measures and incentives to preserve Albemarle's historic and archaeological resources in order to foster pride in the County and maintain the County's character: Since being purchased in 2003 by St. John Church (who originally donated the land in 1923 upon which the school was built), the church and SJFLFC, Inc. have achieved recognition of St. John School's historic importance on the local, state and

federal levels. Through the owner's efforts, the school was granted a Virginia State Highway marker in 2016 and was listed on the state and federal registers of historic places in 2019. Pursuing adaptive reuse of the vacant school with a compatible use that serves the community is consistent with objective 2 by protecting and preserving this historic landmark into the future.

HCSR, Objective 3: Provide educational programs in the community about historic resources and preservation: One of the stated objectives in SJFLFC's mission statement is to inform the public on the early history of African American education, exemplified by the Rosenwald Fund school program. Toward that end, lectures and programs will be offered on this subject as well as museum displays in the original "industrial classroom" space. Most effectively, the historic school itself will educate visitors through its restoration and recovery of original features and spaces.

HCSR, Objective 4: Promote regional cooperation in preservation and conservation efforts, including the promotion of heritage tourism: Between 1917 and 1932, the Rosenwald Fund helped finance the construction of 5,357 schools across 15 southern states. In Virginia alone, 381 schools were constructed primarily in rural areas. Based upon a survey by Preservation Virginia two years ago, approximately 66% of the original schools have been demolished. Recognizing the importance and vulnerability of these historic buildings, a Multiple Property Documentation Form was placed on the state and national registers in 2004 for "Rosenwald Schools in Virginia." Preservation Virginia has an interactive map documenting all Rosenwald Schools in Virginia, demolished and standing: <https://preservationva.maps.arcgis.com/apps/View/index.html?appid=4bdc01599f964ed68390c99ad2c86564> Surviving Rosenwald Schools are now being recognized as a network across Virginia and the south that links history, preservation, and ethnic heritage organizations to a unique and important story that must be told. As the only restored Rosenwald School in Albemarle County, St. John School could play an important role in promoting heritage tourism and regional cooperation in preservation.

#### **IMPACTS ON PUBLIC FACILITIES & PUBLIC INFRASTRUCTURE**

A private on-site well provides water for the proposed St. John Family Life and Fitness Center. Similarly, an on-site septic system was improved in 2017 to service both St. John Church and the proposed Fitness Center. Electrical service would be reestablished with the local electrical authority. Route 640, St. John Road, would provide public vehicular access to the facility, as it previously did for the former residence and school.

#### **IMPACTS ON ENVIRONMENTAL FEATURES**

Since the proposed project would adaptively reuse an existing structure, as well as utilize existing paved parking areas, the only imperious site features anticipated to be added are two 34' long sidewalks connecting the east principal entrances with the parking lot. No other environmental impacts are planned or anticipated.