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RE: Living Earth School request for special use permit

PROJECT PROPOSAL

LIVING EARTH SCHOOL SPECIAL USE PERMIT PROJECT PLAN PROPOSAL FOR ISRAEL MOUNTAIN FARM. Living Earth School (LES) is seeking a Special Use Permit for the operation of Living Earth nature education programs, including summer camps, mentoring, weekend, and homeschool support programs on the Israel Mountain Farm, property parcel number 08600-00-00-017C0, consisting of 414.93 acres of farmland, owned by ISRAEL'S GAP COMMUNITY FUND LLC.

Overall, we see LES's new home as a welcoming place, that has a feeling of a sanctuary for those that come, a place that feels special. We want it to feel like a world away from mainstream life, a safe place for all, where it reminds people the best of what it is to be a human. Ideally, the layout of the educational facility will highlight the diverse natural features of the land. We want dedicated areas for learning, while the pull of the wild allows students to discover natural mysteries. We want this to be a place where people can return again and again and still connect to what is real- nature. Though we need some basic indoor facilities we don't want them to be the focal point. We want nature to be highlighted where one can sit on a rock and be present with the moment, and not be overstimulated by the human built environment.

The land at Israel Mountain Farm has been a clear cut for three generations and is currently a mix of deciduous hardwood forest, young loblolly pines, briars and stumps, invasive plant species and weeds. The remaining hardwoods are mostly on the mountainside, and along the two creeks that run through the property. The land currently is in an unhealthy state due to years of monoculture forestry and clear-cutting has left the soils decimated and void of nutrient variants required for a healthy ecosystem.

The impact of our programs on adjacent lots is expected to be minimal. The neighboring lots to the proposed site for LES are farms and agriculture lands on two sides, and buffered by the mountain top and critical slope land to the South/East, and the forest of Miller school to the North/West. The lot size is 414 acres and the proposed location for the LES operations effectively creates only ONE adjacent property, 796 Pounding Creek Rd, which is currently agriculture without housing on the property. That adjacent property is also separated by a critical slope that is adjacent to the LES proposed site, creating a natural separation from LES activities along with the zoning required buffers.

Public need and Benefit: The Living Earth School camps and year round nature education programs benefit the community by helping to create the next generation of citizens knowledgeable of land ecosystems, care and sustainable conservationism. This use supports the vision outlined in the Albemarle County Planned Use document. If we are to retain our rural environment and protect our lands, we need future leaders and citizens who value the land and nature. The Living Earth School (LES) programs and staff have been educating families, kids, and communities to understand, value and protect our lands for over 20 years. Living Earth School is a well established, respected and committed nature based community organization that delivers award winning summer camps and nature programs for Charlottesville area families. We serve a functional need of parents needing a place to send their kids in the summer, yet provide outstanding mentoring that they have shown

confidence in over the last 19 years. Access to wild places, as well as to knowledgeable mentors, is an increasing need in the community, especially youth who increasingly spend their time indoors. LES is committed to making quality nature education and experiences available to everyone, and this land is the difference maker to achieving that goal.

This Project will have a minimal impact on the character of the area. The large size of Israel Mountain Farm, diversity of terrain and location is an ideal location for LES nature education programs, especially with its remote nature with very few residential homes nearby. LES use is in line with the area conservation and protection of the natural landscape, protection of the rural land as farm, forest and preventing it from more development. We provide experiences that are fun, educational, build connections with the land, and help people feel like they belong with a minimal impact on the land, and purposefully so. Our programs are not noisy by their very nature, so would not add to noise pollution of the area. Our programs are educational on how to care, build and live with nature.

Summer is the Living Earth's School peak season for land usage by programs. We are planning for immediate needs in that we need a home to operate our programs, as the local market does not provide sustainable options or reasonable availability. And we are planning for the future needs as the programs grow, yet our principles keep a light impact on the land. Peak participant counts in past summers was 100-120 kids, but we look to support 200 individuals on the land, per week-day, over the 8-9 weeks of summer on Israel Mountain Farm in the future.

Expected trip numbers to support participants coming to the programs project to be as follows:

Summer: weekday and weekend trips (one trip is to LES, and from LES) 75 daily trips for 8-9 weeks over the summer, our busy season.

Fall, Winter, Spring weekday and weekend trips are projected to be 20-25 trips per day on average With several days having minimal trips as there are no programs taking place typically on Sundays and Mondays.

Living Earth School actively promotes carpooling, and multiple children in attendance from a single family decreases automobile traffic. See the table at the end of this application for occupancy numbers by season.

Living Earth School requests to hold twice a year, fundraising events that would be upwards of 400 participants at the event. We would utilize bus shuttle transportation services from Crozet and Charlottesville to and from these events in an effort to minimize automobile traffic. We would provide staff to direct traffic for these fundraising events as well. That being said, we are a family organization and 400 participants is likely about 100 families, families traveling together to and from events.

Not a zoning change request. The proposed land use is consistent with the comprehensive plan. Use of the land as a nature education center focused on being a steward of our earth is in line with the county zoning classification of the land for rural use, agricultural and forest. The proposed use is also in line with current use of adjacent lots (Miller School), and neighbors nearby that have created land conservation development projects specifically designed to prevent overdevelopment, congestion, and land destruction.

Consistency with Comprehensive Plans

Department of Agriculture and Forestry Goals Supported: Our plans to improve land soils, enrich the forest by planting more local plants and trees, the active removal of invasive non-native species is supportive of the Department of Agriculture, Forestry Departments goals. We see the LES specifically supporting the following goals of the Virginia Code underlined below:

Our project is in harmony with the county's vision and desired use. The proposed use of the land for LES nature programs supports the Virginia Code § [15.2-2288.6](#), **Sec. 5.1.58**, that directly states, *"the county's vision for the Rural Area designated in the comprehensive plan include having a strong agricultural economy with large lots on which to produce agricultural products, opportunities to gain value from processing those products, and accessing local markets; maintaining a clearly visible rural character achieved by supporting lively rural industries and activities; having a significant tourist economy in which the rural landscape augments the visitors' experience; and having diverse, interconnected areas of viable habitat, healthy streams, sustainable supplies of unpolluted groundwater, and protected historic and cultural resources. The comprehensive plan's stated goal to protect the county's agricultural lands as a resource base for its agricultural industries and for the related benefits they contribute towards the county's rural character, scenic quality, natural environment, and fiscal health is achieved, in part, by allowing appropriately scaled low-impact events and activities on farms engaged in agricultural production as provided in this section. The comprehensive plan's stated goal to encourage creative and diverse forms of rural production and support rural land uses is achieved, in part, by allowing the events and activities such as farm sales, low-impact forms of agritourism, and other events and activities provided herein."*

LES programs draw participants to its programs from multiple states, and even internationally. This presents to the world that Charlottesville, Albemarle, and Virginia is a top agritourism destination, and Environmental leaders with programs to support this mission.

Impact on Public Facilities and Public Infrastructure:

LES is very conscious of traffic, and the majority (<90%) of the traffic is expected to approach from Dick Woods Road per our database of where our students live and GIS mapping software that directs traffic from Charlottesville, Crozet, northern and eastern locations onto Dicks Wood Road to the proposed LES site. Pounding Creek Road is the gravel road in western Albemarle County that will be used for arrival and departure of program participants via our site entrance. That estimated 90% of traffic will come from the North, this will create minimal vehicle trips passing the few houses on Pounding Creek Road to the south. Also, our overnight programs also minimize participant trips with half of our participants *making only "one in and one out" trip per week.*

LES is willing to place signage as needed, or requested to direct vehicles. Carpooling is strongly and actively promoted by LES to all participants via emails sign up forms. We will work with VDOT on transportation impact and how to address any potential negative impact.

Our vision includes using compostable toilets (that meet VDH regulations), composting waste, water retention systems for water conservation, local wood for buildings, solar power, etc.

All provisions for outdoor campfires and emergency access will conform to Albemarle County fire codes. Buildings, water and waste components and infrastructure will conform to Albemarle County Health and Safety codes.

Impacts on Environmental Features of the land.

Vehicle access is limited to improved surfaces on the LES proposed site. There will be minimal negative impact on the environmental features of the mountain, fields, land, creeks and woods as these are features we use for teaching and in programs. We need those structures present. The participants will be exploring and learning the land on foot, in nature. Learning to be caretakers and stewards of the land and its inhabitants. Active regeneration and care of the forest is part of our organization's mission. Rehabbing the land, increasing natural species of plants and animals, while actively removing invasive plant species is part of LES programs that will be expanded on LES homeland.

Our building plans envision: nice buildings that highlight natural materials, clean design and functionally use natural light, and operate off the grid. We intend to design the buildings to be beautiful, blending in with the land, feel good to be in yet they pull one's awareness outside so that nature stays the center piece.

Specific questions that are asked on the 'Special Use Permit Checklist' are:

- Description of any lighting or amplified sound equipment, with plans for limiting impact on adjacent properties? LES does not have plans to install any amplified sound system other than required for safety and security. I.E. a siren to alert participants to dangerous weather. Our camps are only electrified from the main hall, including the kitchen, nurse office, etc. LES does not want any lights that pollute the night sky.
- Description or map any proposed forest clearing within use areas. LES will selectively remove some trees that would present a danger to camp tents or cabins. The plan shows the areas for the hall and parking are already clear cut from a few years prior and no new cutting will be necessary, just land grading. The proposed road is an old logging road already in existence.

Why Israel Mountain Farm? Israel Mountain Farm (IMF) is a sustainable land use working farm of over 415 acres. IMF supports farming and agricultural activities with access rights to the land via lease fee. This large property will also support nonprofits that provide natural resource utilization for sustainability programs involving: Silva, Agriculture, Farming, Nature conservation and sustainable utilization. Living Earth School's vision and mission align in complete support with the IMF mission. It is a fantastic partnership and opportunity for both organizations to serve our community through a shared resource.

About Living Earth School

LES has successfully operated for over 19 years in the Charlottesville area, providing families from over 10 states across the USA with nature connection education and mentoring programs. We have a unique educational model that has earned us awards, and proves to be highly effective in helping our students know who they are, and to fall in love with the land. Our staff and organization are deeply committed to this work. Our programs fill, with a long waitlist, which shows there is a large need for this type of work. Yet, our long term facility in Sugar Hollow is being put to other uses by the Girl Scouts so is no longer available to us. This puts our programs in jeopardy of not being viable into the future. Thus the synchronicity of Israel Mountain Farm and LES seems like a perfect partnership to be able to continue our loved nature programs.

-LES is a member of the American Camping Association, and follows best practices within the large national camp industry to run a safe, effective camp.

-We carry liability insurance that is standard for the camping industry to make sure everyone is protected.

-Our staff receive first aid certifications, go through rigorous staff training, and all receive background checks.

LES Program Schedules Estimated Participant Count by Week and Season.

	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Spring							
Staff	4	4	4	4	4	4	4-6
Participants	50	50	50	50	50	50	50-75
Trips	25	25	25	25	25	25	30-45
Summer							
Staff- live on site	18	30	30	30	30	30	4-6
Participants	108	174	174	174	174	174	50
Trips	60	30	30	30	30	95	25

Fall							
Staff	4	4	4	4	4	4	2-4
Participants	50	50	50	50	50	50	20-40
Trips	25	25	25	25	25	25	10-25
Winter							
Staff	4	4	4	4	4	4	2-4
Participants	50	50	50	50	50	50	20-40
Trips	25	25	25	25	25	25	10-25

Programs:

Weekend Kids Program:

- [Forest Dwellers, Woodland Girls, Red Arrow Boys](#): 1 weekend day a month (6 hours), over 4 months. These three programs will consist of 12 days of outdoor skills and education programming for kids age 6-16
- [LES Teen Apprentice Program](#) (TAP): Teenagers, age 11-18, 1 full weekend Saturday 9am through Sunday 4pm for 8 months. Learning life wilderness skills, foraging, tracking, building tools, forest dwellings from natural resources, learning trees, birds, animals etc.
- Summer Day Camp: June-August (weeks vary) M-F, 8:45-4:00 daily. Ages 5-17 lean socialization, outdoor fun, wilderness skills and cycle of life appreciation please see our web site for the variety of summer day camp programs we provide:
<https://livingearthva.com/summer-camps-for-kids-in-virginia-nature-camps/>
- Summer Overnight Camp: June - August (weeks vary) Sunday arrival at 3-4pm, depart on Friday at 2-4pm, sessions are currently 1 week long. Ages 5-17 lean socialization, outdoor fun, wilderness skills and cycle of life appreciation

Weekend Adult program (click on title for details):

[Living Earth Adult Foundations \(LEAF\) – Nine Empowering Weekends in Community and Nature](#); 1 weekend a month for 9 months: connecting self to community, culture, and nature.

[Moon Tribe for Women](#): Healing Self and Culture through Rites of Passage

[Crafting Weekend Workshop](#): Learn craft making

[Wild Edible Plants Workshop](#): learn what wild plants are edible and how to forage

[Wildflower Workshop](#): learn wildflowers, native, invasive, caring and gardening flowers

[Family Knife Making / Leather Working Camp](#)

[Family Archery: Making a wooden long bow or quiver and arrows](#)

[Animal Tracking Series](#)

A number of our programs take the participants to the mountains and rivers. We are not expeditions, we are mentoring participants on the cycle of nature, self discovery and how to develop the best 'you'.

[Wilderness Quest 2021](#)

[Appalachian Trail Hike 2021 – Intro to Backpacking](#)

[Teen River Expeditions 2021](#)

[Adult May Backpacking Trip](#) (OFFSITE)

[Women's Backpacking](#) (OFFSITE)

We also provide local custom programs for area organizations. Supporting Nonprofits with nature and mental health programs is an area we are targeting for growth in the future:

- Hospice of the Piedmont
- Charlottesville Waldorf School
- Richmond Waldorf School
- Blue Ridge Mountain School
- UVA Darden School
- Ivy Preservation League
- Local scholarships to children in need referred to us by our social worker friends.

LES proposed structures and facilities, with estimated sizes.

The Program Land Requirements are the "must haves and wish list" for what LES will need to deliver programs today, tomorrow and futuristically				
STRUCTURES	Description	Quantity	Sq Ft footprint	Land Impact of Building
SITE DEV	Road: Entrance, Exit, Drop off, Circle	1		Already Clear Cut Land
SITE DEV	Road: construction fire road to tent/cabin area	1		Already a logging road
SITE DEV	Parking		??	Already Clear Cut Land
SITE DEV	Bridge at entrance	1		Already a logging road
SITE DEV	Entrance GATE - lockable	1		Already a logging road
	Tents (each tent on a 12'x14' platform base)	14	less than 2,100sq ft footprint in Total	Cutting down dangerous limb dropping species in the area, minimal cutting as tents fit into current wooded area
	Cabins - temporary staff housing, sleeping rooms	10	less than 2,400sq ft footprint in Total	Cutting down dangerous limb dropping species in the area, minimal cutting as tents fit into current wooded area
	Pavilions	3	less than 1600sq ft footprint in total for all 3	Cutting down a few trees to makes space for building and use the trees cut down for buildings on the land
	Nature Library	1	less than 600sq ft footprint in Total	Cutting down a few trees to makes space for building and use the trees cut down for buildings on the land
	Shower Building	1	less than 500sq ft footprint in Total	removal of a half dozen trees
Depends on Health Dept	Compost Toilets	3-4	less than 1000sq ft footprint in Total	
SITE DEV	H2O Pump house	1	less than 1000sq ft footprint in Total	If needed
SITE DEV	Electricity; YES Solar	?		Solar to be constructed on land already Clear Cut
SITE DEV	Septic System	?		Expected to be installed in land already clear cut

CAMP HALL:	Camp Hall: the main Building for LES	1	2,500 sq ft footprint (two stories for 5000 sq ft potential building) in Total	Already Clear Cut Land, BUILDING WILL BLEND IN WITH NATURE
in Camp Hall	Commercial Kitchen	1		Already Clear Cut Land
in Camp Hall	Walk in Freezer/fridge	1		
in Camp Hall	Fire Suppression for kitchen, and building	1		
in Camp Hall	bathrooms	3-4		
Storage	Storage Barn	1	est 1,200 sq ft footprint in Total	Already Clear Cut Land
Storage	Storage Barn	1	est 1,200 sq ft footprint in Total	Already Clear Cut Land
	Carriage House	1	1200 Sq ft footprint	Already clear cut, by entrance, site security, Artist in Residence