



Town of Atherton
Planning Department
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DATE: June 28, 2023

TO: PLANNING COMMISSION

FROM: SEAN MANALO, ASSOCIATE PLANNER
RADHA HAYAGREEV, SENIOR PLANNER

APPLICANT: MENLO SCHOOL
Mr. Loren Arms, Director of Operations and Construction

SUBJECT: Accept the 2023 Menlo School Annual Master Plan Update (MPL23-00002) & Request for a Conditional Use Permit (CUP23-00003) to allow for a new infant play area and the renovation of 2 modular buildings for an existing infants and pre-school childcare facility for Menlo School at 50 Valparaiso, zoned PFS

LOCATION: Address: 50 Valparaiso Avenue
APN: 070-360-070
Zoning District: Public Facilities and Schools District (PFS)

CEQA: This project is categorically exempt from further CEQA review pursuant to: Section 15301 (Existing Facilities), Section 15303 (New Construction or Conversion of Small Structures), and Section 15183 (Projects Consistent with a Community Plan, General Plan, or Zoning) of the CEQA Guidelines.

RECOMMENDATION:

There are two recommendations in this report:

1. Staff recommends that the Planning Commission accept the 2023 Menlo School Annual Master Plan Update; and
2. Staff also recommends the Planning Commission finds that the proposed CUP is categorically exempt under the provisions of CEQA and approve the Conditional Use Permit for the renovation and expansion of the pre-school and infant care facility with Conditions of Approval subject to the findings in this Staff Report.

PART 1: 2023 MASTER PLAN OVERVIEW

BACKGROUND

Menlo School is an independent coeducational, college preparatory school for students Grade 6-12. The school is accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges and is a member of the National and California Associations of Independent Schools.

Originally founded as a military school in 1915, Menlo School would eventually become a non-profit institution governed by a newly formed board of trustees. A two-year college was later established as an integral part of the school. By 1949, the name was officially changed to Menlo School and Menlo College. The school underwent significant change in following years with the introduction of co-educational facilities (1979-1981), and the addition of sixth grade to the Middle School (1993-1994). The College and School formally separated in June 1994. Menlo School and Menlo College are now entirely independent entities each with their own board, administration, and faculty. Each institution owns and occupies the land and buildings on its section of the 62-acre campus while sharing some of the common sports facilities on campus.

Pursuant to Atherton Municipal Code Chapter 17.26.050 Guidelines for School Master Plans, , the Town of Atherton requires all private schools located in the PFS zoning district to prepare annual updates of the school master plan which would be reviewed, presented and accepted by the Planning Commission. The annual meeting is required to be noticed to all property owners within five hundred feet of the boundaries of the school.

Menlo School's Master Plan was first introduced in 1999 by the Menlo School Board of Trustees. The Planning Commission has accepted the annual updates from Menlo School every year since 2000. In recognition of the tie between construction projects and fundraising efforts, Menlo School has changed the description of both past and future phasing of the current Master Plan to the descriptions below:

- Phase 0 – Perimeter landscape project
- Phase I- Middle School Campus (completed 2000)
- Phase II – Upper School Academic Buildings 1 and 2 (completed 2004)
- Phase III – Athletic Center (completed 2011), Create Arts and Design Center (completed 2013), Performing Arts Center (completed 2020)
- Phase IV – Central Campus Project (completed 2017)
- Phase V – Childcare Renovation Project (CURRENT)

In June 2011, the Planning Commission approved Menlo School's application for a Conditional Use Permit to allow the School to increase its maximum enrollment from 750 to 795 students. The Conditional Use Permit was approved subject to conditions that required the school to implement a Transportation Demand Management (TDM) program designed to substantially reduce the number of vehicle trips accessing the facility. Details related to Menlo School's enrollment and traffic/parking capacity utilization requirements as referenced in this Staff Report and in the Annual Master Plan Update are referenced from the conditions established in the TDM program.

ANALYSIS

The attached document entitled “Menlo School Master Plan 2023” is Menlo Schools’ submittal for their 2023 Master Plan Update. The Atherton Municipal Code (AMC) Section 17.36.050 suggests content of master plans include: land uses, their location and extent, circulation patterns, locations for parking and parking standards, current enrollment projections and maximum enrollment anticipated, a list of possible facilities to be developed, a schedule or priority of development, identification of historic or other unique facilities, heritage trees, and their disposition, identification of uses and their days and hours of operation, including evenings, and identification of other institutions or uses at the facility. The 2023 Update content is consistent with the AMC suggested criteria as highlighted below:

Traffic and Transportation

Circulation and access to Menlo School remains, with the school’s primary entrance continuing to be along Valparaiso Avenue. The school maintains approximately 423 parking spaces, the majority of which (192 spaces) are located in the main lot and the Annex lot off of Valparaiso Avenue. These spaces are made available for students in grades 11 and 12 only, as well as faculty, staff and visitors. Students and spectators using the Athletic Center are directed to parking in the main school lot after 3:00pm.

The Transportation Demand Management (TDM) program established in 2012 requires Menlo School to remain under the traffic and parking targets set by the Town. Compliance is based on the yearly average of the school’s measurements. Table 2 summarizes Menlo School’s traffic counts for the current academic year as of May 19, 2023. This summary follows two years impacted by the pandemic, as resumed to full on-campus instruction and normal traffic patterns on campus for 2021-2022. The school remains compliant with peak traffic and parking commitments.

Table 2: 2023 Traffic Counts
(Attachment 1, Page 20- Menlo School Master Plan)

| | Peak Hour | Target | Average | Status |
|----------------------------|------------------|---------------|----------------|---------------|
| AM | 617 | 627 | ---- | Below Target |
| PM | 415 | 453 | ---- | Below Target |
| Parking Utilization | | | | |
| | ---- | 86.5% | 71% | Below Target |

The Master Plan Update includes an:

- Inventory of on-site Parking Spaces (page 13)
- Map of fire truck access routes and Fire Hydrants (page 14) and,
- Discussion on Traffic and Daily Mechanical Monitoring (page 20)

Facilities Planning, Development, and Land Uses

The 2023 Master Plan Update is in Attachment 1 and includes a general description and summary of completed facilities consistent with the phasing and timeline of the Master Plan including the middle school campus, upper school academic buildings, athletic center, creative arts and design center, performing arts center, central campus project and now a childcare renovation project from 2000 to 2017 with the childcare renovation in 2023.

Enrollment

Table 3 shows projected and actual enrollment at Menlo School from years 2021-2024. Menlo School cites circumstances related to the pandemic that resulted in an uptick in student enrollment in previous academic years. The school has reduced enrollment to the approved number of 795 students to comply with their conditional use permit, approved by the Planning Commission in June 2011 (CUP10-00007).

Table 3: Enrollment 2021-2024
(Attachment 1, Page 22- Menlo School Master Plan)

| Academic Year | Enrollment (Committed) | Enrollment (Actual) | Enrollment (Projected) | Status |
|----------------------|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| 2021-2022 | 795 | 818 | --- | Exceeds by 23 |
| 2022-2023 | 795 | 806 | --- | Exceeds by 11 |
| 2023-2024 | 795 | 795 | 795 | Meets Commitment |

Public Outreach

Menlo School maintains a continuously updated master calendar of events on the Menlo School website, as well as regular opportunities to engage with the community to communicate the most current information with a focus on convenience and accessibility. This is consistent with the Planning Commission’s 2021 recommendation to establish an annual program of neighbor outreach to address an increase in traffic or noise associated with the Campus’ activities. The 2023 Update contains a section entitled “Annual Letter to Neighbors” on page 21. The text includes a copy of the 2023 letter inviting neighbors to attend the Menlo School’s Annual Meeting of Neighbors scheduled for May 15, 2023. The letter also informs the community of additional events planned for the remainder of the school year.

PUBLIC COMMENT and NOTICE:

Public hearing notices were sent to owners within 500 feet of the project site. At the time publishing this report, staff did not receive any public comment. Legal advertisements of the meeting agenda listing this project was published in the Almanac on June 16th

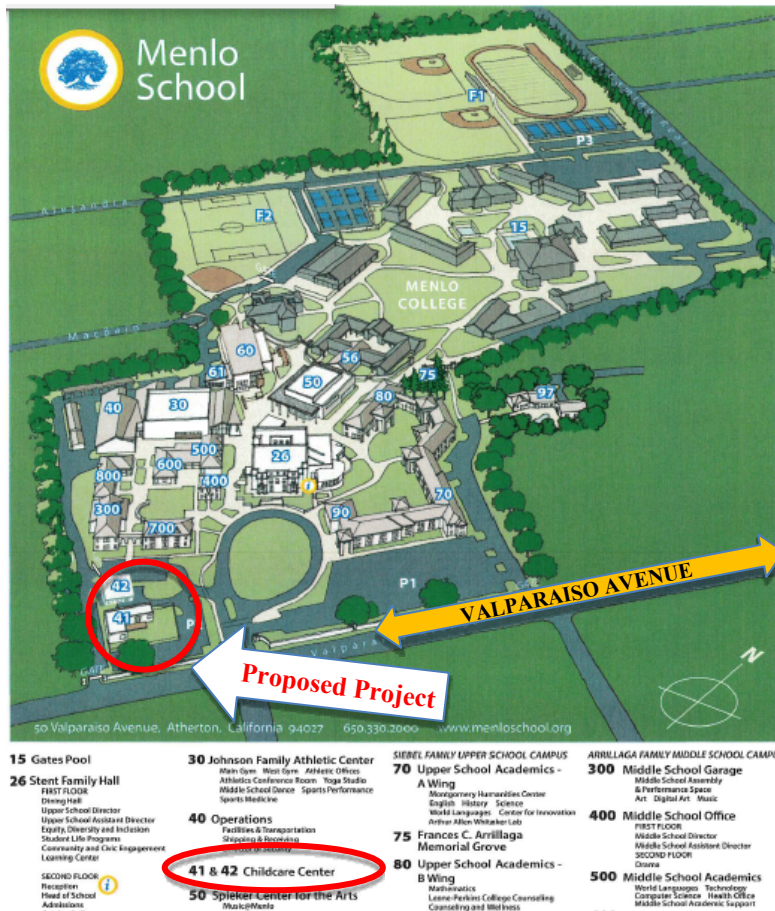
SUGGESTED MOTION FOR MASTER PLAN UPDATE:

I move that the Planning Commission accept the Menlo School at 50 Valparaiso Avenue, based on the findings in the staff report.

PART 2: CONDITIONAL USE PERMIT – Project Analysis

Application

On April 13, 2023, the applicant submitted a building permit application to allow for the commercial renovation of the existing childcare facilities. After consulting with Planning Department Staff and hosting a site visit of the property, an application was submitted with the attached documents and project plans for consideration by the Planning Commission to accept the 2023 Menlo School Annual Master Plan Update as well as to grant a Conditional Use Permit to Menlo School for the proposed renovations of the childcare center. Upon receiving Planning Commission approval, Menlo School can continue to make progress on the building permit for the project.





Map 2: Project Zoning Map

BACKGROUND:

Location and Context

The project site (Menlo School) is located near the Town’s eastern boundary with the City of Menlo Park, and just south of California Highway 82 (El Camino Real). The 16.44-acre site includes a collection of academic and administrative buildings, athletic facilities, operations facilities, open space areas, and parking lots to support the middle school and upper school students and faculty on site.

Menlo School Buildings total 311,324 sq. ft. in gross square footage and range from 85,000 square feet to 4,300 square feet in size. Cartan Field and Gates Pool are two athletic facilities utilized by Menlo School students, located on the neighboring Menlo College campus. A childcare center for infants and preschool age children (infants to 5 years old) dedicated to faculty and staff children also exists at the southeast corner of the site adjacent to single-family residential properties along Valparaiso Avenue.

Valparaiso Avenue bounds the site to the east, and Alejandra Avenue to the west with a portion of the property directly adjacent to the Menlo College campus. The project site is also bound by a collection of low-density single-family homes to the north and south. Table 1 below summarizes the project site’s land use designation and surrounding uses.

Table 1: Surrounding Zoning and Land Uses

| | General Plan | Zoning | Existing Uses |
|---------------------|---|---|---|
| Subject Site | Public Facilities and School District (PFS) | Public Facilities and School District (PFS) | Menlo School Campus, Independent (Private) Middle and High School |
| North | Low Density Single Family Residential | Single-Family Residential (R1-A) | Single-Family Homes |

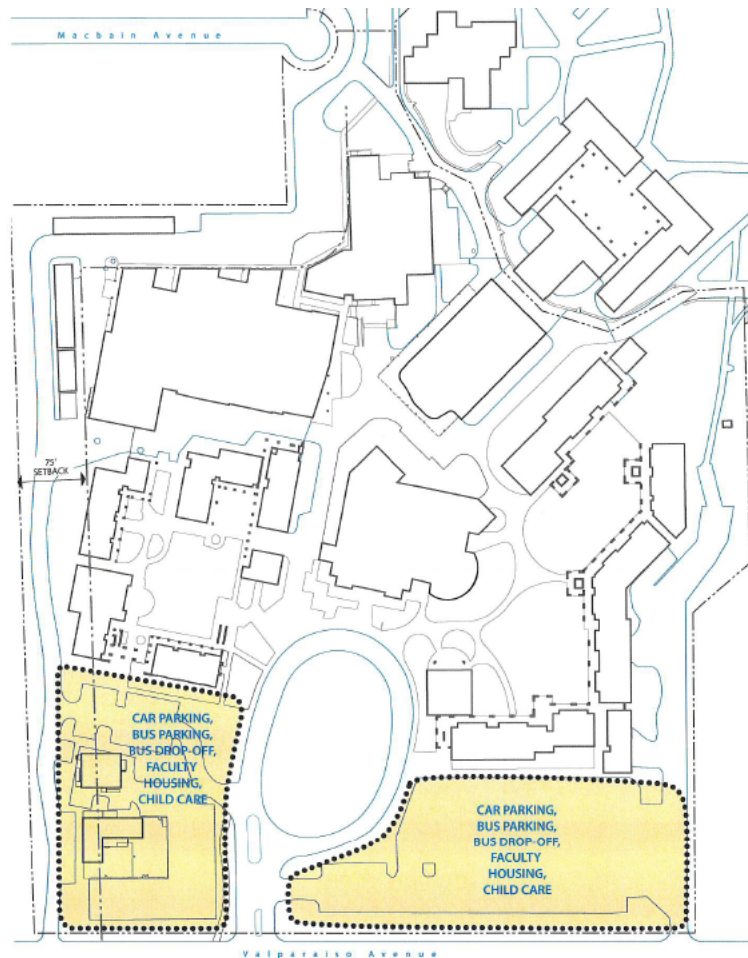
| | | | |
|------------------|---|---|---|
| South | Low Density Single Family Residential | Single-Family Residential (R1-A) | Single-Family Homes |
| East | City of Menlo Park | City of Menlo Park | City of Menlo Park |
| West (I) | Low Density Single Family Residential | Single-Family Residential (R1-A) | Single-Family Homes |
| West (II) | Public Facilities and School District (PFS) | Public Facilities and School District (PFS) | Menlo College Campus, Independent (private) College |

Project Description

The project consists of the renovation of two existing modular buildings and the conversion of an existing paved drop-off area to an infant play area. Both buildings are currently used for an onsite childcare center for School faculty and staff members. Menlo School presently has two childcare licenses: (1) a license that permits a maximum of 17 infants, and (2) a license that permits a maximum of 17 preschoolers. The proposed remodel of the two buildings will increase the infant space to accommodate 20 infants. Menlo School intends to keep the preschool license for 17 students. Therefore, the proposed project will net an overall increase of 3. According to plans provided by the Applicant, construction for the proposed project is expected to take place between July 2023 – November 2023.

The Master Plan illustrates the school’s Main Campus Land Uses (Page 8) and identifies the location of the project in an area that is designated for new buildings and site work related to car parking, bus parking, bus drop -off, faculty housing, and childcare. The Main Campus Land Use Map is provided as Figure 1 in this staff report.

Figure 1: Main Campus Land Use
(Attachment 1, Page 8- Menlo School Master Plan)



The plan above illustrates the approved and potential Land Uses for Menlo School as well as the location and footprint of the new buildings and site work.

8 Menlo School Master Plan

Main Campus Land Use

The improvements to the childcare facility and upgrades include interior work, exterior work, site work and improvement to accessibility to path of travel improvements and egress compliance for the existing two structures. More details of the scope of the proposed project can be found in page 17 of Attachment-1 of the Master Plan.

Heritage Tree Protection

The project has been reviewed by the Town Arborist and no comments were provided. The project is subject to standard conditions related to Atherton Municipal Code 8.10 on Removal and Damage of Heritage Trees.

Access, Circulation, and Parking

The proposal shows removal of seven existing car parks and installing one van accessible handicap parking space, resulting in a net loss of 6 parking spaces.

The daycare facility is an incentive program available only to Menlo School's faculty and teachers

currently. Any improvement to this facility and related concerns regarding circulation and parking is minimal since the programming for this is to facilitate existing faculty personnel.

Generally, the PFS Zone development standards does not require off-street parking. The TDM monitoring program, per Table 2 above, indicated that the average parking utilization in the 2022-2023 academic year was approximately 15% below target. Therefore, staff considered that the net loss of six parking spaces is minimal and can be recommended for approved for this CUP.

Zoning Ordinance

The project will operate within an area of the Menlo School Campus designated for the childcare center. Minimal exterior work will take place on the two existing buildings. The site will be improved and expanded to include an enclosed infant play area and will be supported with path of travel improvements to increase accessibility. Table 5 demonstrates project consistency with the Public Facilities and Schools District (PFS) development standards:

Table 5: Zoning Ordinance Consistency

| | PFS Standard | Proposed Project | Complies? |
|---|---|-------------------------|------------------|
| Setbacks (Minimum) | | | |
| Front (East) | 60 Feet | Approximately 250 feet | Yes |
| Side Yard, minimum, adjacent to residential (North/South) | 50 feet when building height \leq 22 ft. 75 feet when building height $>$ 22 ft. | Approximately 160 feet | Yes |
| Rear, minimum, adjacent to residential (West) | 60 feet when building height \leq 22 ft. 75 feet when building height $>$ 22 ft. | Approximately 560 feet | Yes |
| Rear, minimum, all others (West) | 60 Feet | Approximately 560 feet | Yes |
| Building Height (Max) | 34 Feet | 12 Feet | Yes |
| Lot Coverage (Max) | 40% | Not Applicable | Not Applicable |

PUBLIC COMMENT and NOTICE:

Public hearing notices were sent to owners and occupants within 500 feet of the project site. At the time publishing this report, staff did not receive any public comment. Legal advertisements of the meeting agenda listing this project was published in the Almanac on June 16th

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW:

This Project is categorically exempt from further environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15301 (Existing Facilities); and

CEQA Guidelines Section 15303 (New Construction or Conversion of Small Structures); and Section 15183 (Projects Consistent with a Community Plan, General Plan, or Zoning).

CONCLUSION:

Per AMC Chapter 17.12.030: The Planning Commission can grant conditional use permits when the following findings are met:

1: The proposed use is consistent with the General Plan and all applicable provisions of this title.

Staff review: The proposed use for the childcare renovation and improvement project can be found to be consistent with the following General Plan Goals:

LU Policy 1.6: The Town shall continue to preserve the open space characteristics of existing schools, churches, and park facilities.

LU Goal 3: Assure development of private schools continue to reflect the Town’s character as a scenic, semi-rural, thickly wooded residential area.

CIR Policy 5.3: During the annual review of private school master plans, the Planning Commission should evaluate and address traffic congestion and flow issues to assure that impacts on the circulation system are not excessive.

OSC Policy 1.2: The Town seeks to preserve the open space characteristics of existing public and private schools, churches, the Menlo Circus Club, the Bear Gulch Reservoir property and the public parks.

As the childcare center is not available to the public and serves an existing population of faculty and teachers, the project does not anticipate creating excessive impacts to traffic and the current circulation system across campus. Additionally, Private schools are a conditionally permitted use in the Public Facilities and School District (PFS) Zone and the project complies with the applicable development standards, as well as the Menlo School Main Campus Land Uses Map for development.

2: The establishment, maintenance, or operation of the use applied for will not, under the circumstances of the particular case (location, size, design, and operating characteristics), be detrimental to the health, safety, peace, morals, comfort, or general welfare of persons residing or working in the neighborhood of such use, or the general welfare of the town.

Staff Review: The proposed project is a minor renovation and improvement to the existing childcare facility on the campus and it will improve it due to this CUP. The improvements will not be detrimental to the health, safety, peace, morals, comforts, or general welfare of the persons residing in the neighborhood or town owing to this improvement to the facility.

ALTERNATIVES:

The Planning Commission may recommend authorization, authorization with modifications, or denial of the proposed project.

SUGGESTED MOTION FOR APPROVAL of the CONDITIONAL USE PERMIT:

I move that the Planning Commission find the This Project is categorically exempt from further environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15301 (Existing Facilities); and
Approve the Conditional Use Permit to allow for the expansion of childcare services including an infant play area and associated building modifications at Menlo School at 50 Valparaiso Avenue, based on the findings in the staff report.

/s/ Sean Manalo

Sean Manalo, Associate Planner

/s/ Radha Hayagreev

Radha Hayagreev, Senior Planner

Attachments:

1. 2023 Master Plan Update Document
2. Childcare Renovation Projects and Exhibits