ITEM 7-A

CITY OF ALAMEDA
Memorandum

To: Honorable President and
Members of the Planning Board

From: Andrew Thomas, AICP
Acting City Planner

Date: October 22, 2012

Re: **Planned Development Amendment and Design Review – PLN12-0182 – 1011 Chestnut Street – St Joseph Elementary School.** A Planned Development Amendment and Design Review application for St. Joseph Elementary School to construct a 705 square foot kindergarten classroom building facing Lafayette Street.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The applicant, St. Joseph Elementary School, is requesting an amendment to the 2000 Master Plan and Planned Development (PD) for the St. Joseph's campus to place a small modular classroom structure in an existing open space area known as Doherty Park on the campus. The purpose of the new structure is to provide space to move the kindergarten classroom closer to the elementary school. The kindergarten classroom is currently located approximately 150 feet away from the elementary school in the high school building where it has been located for the past 25 years. This report identifies a number of planning concerns with the proposal. Staff is recommending denial of the application.

BACKGROUND

St. Joseph Elementary school is a kindergarten through eighth grade private school that has operated at this site since 1881. The campus is shared with St. Joseph Notre Dame High School and is home to a City of Alameda Monument, the Basilica of Saint Joseph.

The St. Joseph campus is located in a residential neighborhood. The site is zoned R-4-PD, Neighborhood Residential Planned Development Zoning District and is designated Medium-Density Residential under the General Plan.

The Basilica is a designated City Monument and the surrounding buildings have all been designed and constructed to create a unique campus of architecturally distinguished buildings and accompanying open spaces. The Basilica was built in 1921 and the elementary school building was built in 1922. The proposed modular building would be placed immediately adjacent to the elementary school building.

On November 29, 1999, the Planning Board approved Planned Development application PD-98-01 (also referred to as the 2000 Master Plan) and Use Permit UP-99-22 for the St. Joseph site. This decision was appealed to the City Council. The Planning

Board decision was upheld by the City Council (Resolution No. 13190). The project was quite contentious and required an extensive number of public hearings over a course of many months to achieve a balance between St. Joseph's expansion needs and the needs of the neighborhood. (Over 1,000 pages of neighborhood correspondence and material were generated by the proposal.) The final adopted Master Plan represented a final compromise between the school and the neighbors and included requirements and limits on street closures, enrollment, staffing, open space, "neighborhood aesthetics" and classroom expansion areas.

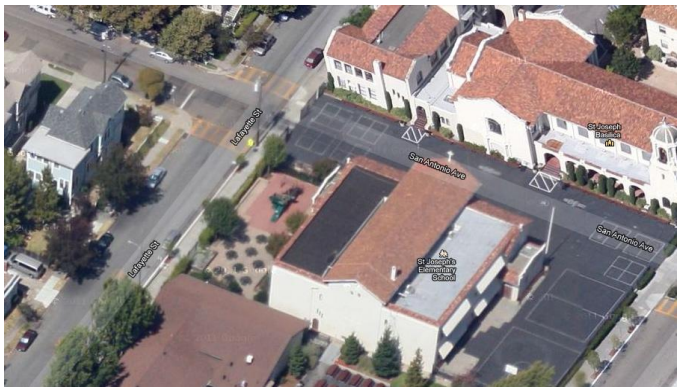

Figure 1: Aerial View of the Park Area

In accordance with the 2000 Master Plan, a number of improvements have been completed to the open space and play area along Lafayette Street. The improvements to Doherty Park created a gathering place for the school community and an outdoor play and eating area for the students.

Figure 2: Project Area as seen from Lafayette St

Figure 1 shows an aerial view of the open landscaped area and playground space between the large elementary school building and the smaller buildings on Lafayette Street. Figure 2 shows the landscaped open space and play area from the neighborhood's perspective on Lafayette Street. Figure 3 shows the landscaped open space from a pedestrian's perspective. The new freestanding kindergarten structure would be placed at the center of the photographed area in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Open Space Area

DISCUSSION

The school has operated at this site for 131 years. The kindergarten classroom has been located in the high school building adjacent to the elementary school building for over 25 years. As stated above, the current classroom is between 150 and 200 feet from the elementary school building.

The proposed new building is designed to allow the existing kindergarten classroom to be moved out of the high school building and closer to the elementary school building. The proposal includes placement of a new 705 square foot modular structure in the existing open space and play area. The new classroom building is a pre-fabricated structure that measures 23'-4" wide by 30' deep and 12'-8" high. The new structure will be set approximately 10 feet from Lafayette Street.

The proposal to place the structure in the park is not consistent with the 2000 Master Plan for the site. Although the 705 square feet is within the total amount of additional square feet that can be allowed campus wide, the applicant has not proposed to reduce any of the previously approved expansions elsewhere on the campus to maintain the overall cap on expansions established by the 2000 Master Plan. Therefore, the 705 feet represents an addition to the previously approved amount of expansion space.

The architectural design of the pre-fabricated building is intended to blend with the existing architecture of the site. Stucco siding, awning windows, and a clay tile roof are designed to match the materials on the adjacent elementary school building. The large tree between the new building and Layette Street will partially screen the structure from the public right of way, assuming that the tree is maintained and preserved at its current location.

Planned Development Findings

The Planning Board may approve a Planned Development (PD) amendment application if it can make five specific findings. The five specific findings are identified below in bold text.

Below each finding, staff has identified a number of issues that staff believes should be considered by the Planning Board when making the necessary findings. As described below, staff does have a number of concerns about the proposal.

1. **The development is a more effective use of the site than is possible under the regulations for which the PD district is combined.** In staff's opinion, this finding cannot be made. The open space adjacent to Lafayette Street provides an important "buffer" between the very large institutional buildings on the site and the adjacent smaller structures in the neighborhood. Large institutional buildings can co-exist in proximity to small residential buildings provided that an adequate space is provided between the buildings. If that space is landscaped and provides an outdoor space for people to occupy between the large building and small building, the relationship between large building and small is improved. The open space acts as a buffer between the differently scaled buildings. If these important "buffer" spaces are filled with buildings, the large institutional buildings will feel more crowded and the apparent massing of the campus in the neighborhood will be increased.

The proposed building as proposed does not include restroom facilities for the kindergarten students. When asked about this, the applicant stated that they planned to add a covered walkway between the new building and the adjacent elementary school building. The addition of a covered walkway will further reduce the open buffer space between the large campus buildings, the public street and neighborhood further contribute to the increased sense of mass on this side of the campus.

Given these issues, staff is not convinced that the proposal represents a more effective use of the site than that provided under the existing Planned Development approval. If the purpose of the application was to increase classroom space for more students, then it might be argued that it is necessary to create more buildings and accept the loss of the open space. However, in this case, the applicant does not need additional classroom space for additional students; the applicant simply wishes to re-organize the arrangement of classroom spaces by creating more classroom space. The fact that the existing arrangement of classrooms has existed for over 25 years without any significant problems indicates to staff that there may be other solutions to resolving the kindergarten issues that might not require placing a portable building within the open space or amending the 2000 Master Plan.

The potential benefits of the proposal do not seem to justify the impacts on the surrounding community and the design integrity of the St. Josephs campus. The fact that the existing condition has existed for over 25 years without any apparent serious problems causes staff to question whether the current proposal is the best possible solution for the campus and the neighborhood over the next 25 years.

Staff is also concerned by the implications of this proposal on the integrity of the 2000 Master Plan. The Master Plan established limitations on expansions and created a balance between St. Joseph's needs and the needs of the adjacent neighborhoods. This proposal incrementally changes the previously agreed to balance of needs. This proposal does not include a companion proposal to reduce the previously approved expansions of any of the other buildings on the campus. Amendments that incrementally undermine the original agreements could result in a condition whereby the neighborhood and the larger community cannot rely on the agreements and limitations that were imposed after much discussion in 1999 and 2000. This lack of certainty and related frustrations led to an extremely lengthy and costly public discussion in 1999 and 2000. Over the last ten years, the Master Plan appears to have worked well for all parties. Any action or series of actions that might undermine the validity of the plan or that might result in the need for a complete reexamination of the conditions at St. Joseph and the future expansion

plans would be an unfortunate expense for the St. Joseph's, the neighborhood, and the City.

2. **The location of the proposed use is compatible with other land uses in the general neighborhood area, and the project design and size is architecturally, aesthetically, and operationally harmonious with the community and surrounding development**. From staff's perspective, this finding is problematic. Adding the portable structure in the open space is not harmonious with the surrounding neighborhood or beneficial to the design of the campus. The elementary school building and the nearby Basilica Building are beautiful buildings. The architectural design of these buildings and the placement of the buildings create a pleasant transition between the campus and the neighborhood. The proposal to place a small modular building between the neighborhood and the elegant, 1922 elementary school building does not create an "aesthetically harmonious" relationship between the campus and the neighborhood.

3. **The proposed use will be served by adequate transportation and service facilities including pedestrian, bicycle, and transit facilities**. The proposal does not change the maximum number of employees or students permitted on the site, which will be served by the currently available transportation facilities and services.

4. **The proposed use, if it complies with all conditions upon which approval is made contingent, will not adversely affect other property in the vicinity and will not have substantial deleterious effects on existing business districts or the local economy**. As described above, the impacts on the neighborhood are aesthetic. The original conditions of approval shall remain in effect; no increase in intensity of use is proposed. These conditions address parking and traffic impacts and provide for a maximum student population.

5. **The proposed use relates favorably to the General Plan**. The classroom use is consistent with the General Plan designation of Medium-Density Residential because residential areas typically contain churches, schools, parks, and day care facilities.

Design Review Findings

The Planning Board may approve a Design Review application if it can make three (3) specific findings. The three specific findings are identified below in bold text. Staff's concerns are idenfied below each finding.

1. **The proposed design is consistent with the General Plan, Zoning Ordinance, and the City of Alameda Design Review Manual.** The design of the modular classroom building was designed to match the surrounding school buildings. For a modular building, it is generally well designed. Staff's concern with the proposed design of the project is caused by the location of the proposed building in the open space and the juxtaposition of the modular building to the adjacent 1922 building, which exhibits a significantly more elegant design. In isolation, the proposed building would be fine. Next to the historic buildings, staff is concerned that the new structure will appear misplaced.

2. **The proposed design is appropriate for the site, is compatible with adjacent or neighboring buildings or surroundings, and promotes harmonious transitions in scale and character in areas between different designated land uses.** For the reasons described above, staff is concerned that the proposed structure is not compatible and harmonious with the design and use of surrounding properties. Specifically, staff is concerned by the incremental increase in massing and physical crowding of buildings that this type of proposal creates for the surrounding neighborhood and the design quality and integrity of the campus.

3. **The proposed design of the structure and exterior materials and landscaping are visually compatible with the surrounding development, and design elements have been incorporated to ensure the compatibility of the structure with the character and uses of adjacent development.** Existing perimeter landscaping will shade and screen the new building. The project will not physically affect the historic Basilica or neighboring residential properties. Window styles and exterior materials, such as stucco and red roof tiles, have been selected to be compatible with other buildings on campus. Generally, the applicant's have tried to provide a building that is compatible with the adjacent development. Unfortunately, in staff's opinion, the proposed location for the new building makes it extremely difficult to achieve visual compatibility.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

A Mitigated Negative Declaration, IS-98-8, and Mitigation Monitoring Program were adopted by the City Council on March 11, 2000 (Resolution No. 13191). The future expansion of the St. Joseph's community was considered in the original Planned Development application. Since the existing student and staffing limits would remain in place, no substantial changes are proposed; therefore, this project is exempt from further environmental review pursuant to the CEQA Guidelines, Section 15162 - Subsequent Environmental Impact Reports.

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Planning Board deny the proposed Planned Development Amendment and Design Review, application number PLN12-0182.

Respectfully submitted,

Andrew Thomas

Exhibits:

1. Draft Resolution
2. Application
3. Project Plans
4. Public Comment
5. 2000 Master Plan and Resolutions