

# City Planning Department



## Memo

To: Cranston City Plan Commission  
From: Doug McLean, AICP, Principal Planner  
Date: July 29, 2021  
Re: **“Garden City Elementary School”**  
Combined Master and Preliminary Plan - Major Land Development

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**Owner/App:** City of Cranston/Cranston School District  
**Location:** 70 Plantation Drive, AP 10, Lot 709  
**Zone:** A-8 (Residential with at least 8,000 sq.ft.)  
**FLU:** Government/Institutional

### I. Proposal

The project will entail the demolition and removal of the existing Garden City Elementary School building and the construction of a new 85,000 s.f. Garden City Elementary School building and associated site improvements in its place. The total area of the site is 5.75 acres which will contain the new school as well as “memorial” site amenities, such as a ball field, playground space, brick walkway, and bench. The use of a public school and public playgrounds is allowed by-right at this location. The project is requesting two (2) dimensional variances for parking and building height detailed within the planning analysis section of this memo. The variances are also addressed as part of a separate, standalone staff memo available on the City’s Planning Department website.

The project has been reviewed by the Development Plan Review Committee (DPRC) and received preliminary plan approval on July 7, 2021. During this meeting, DPRC members addressed all of the technical elements of the overall proposal including the public health and safety issues associated with the project.

The Plan Commission is charged with reviewing and rendering a decision on this combined Master and Preliminary Plan - Major Land Development as well as providing a recommendation on the two (2) dimensional variance requests to the Zoning Board of Review. The project has already been reviewed and vetted through previous public engagement efforts as part of the School Department’s design process. Further background on the preceding reviews and the public “Q&A” process has been included as part of the application documents available on the Planning Department website.

# AERIAL VIEW

(subject parcels marked in orange, 400 foot radius marked in black)



# AERIAL VIEW PARCEL CLOSE-UP



# 3-D VIEW



**STREET VIEW (From Plantation Drive)**



**STREET VIEW (From Kearney Street)**



# ZONING MAP

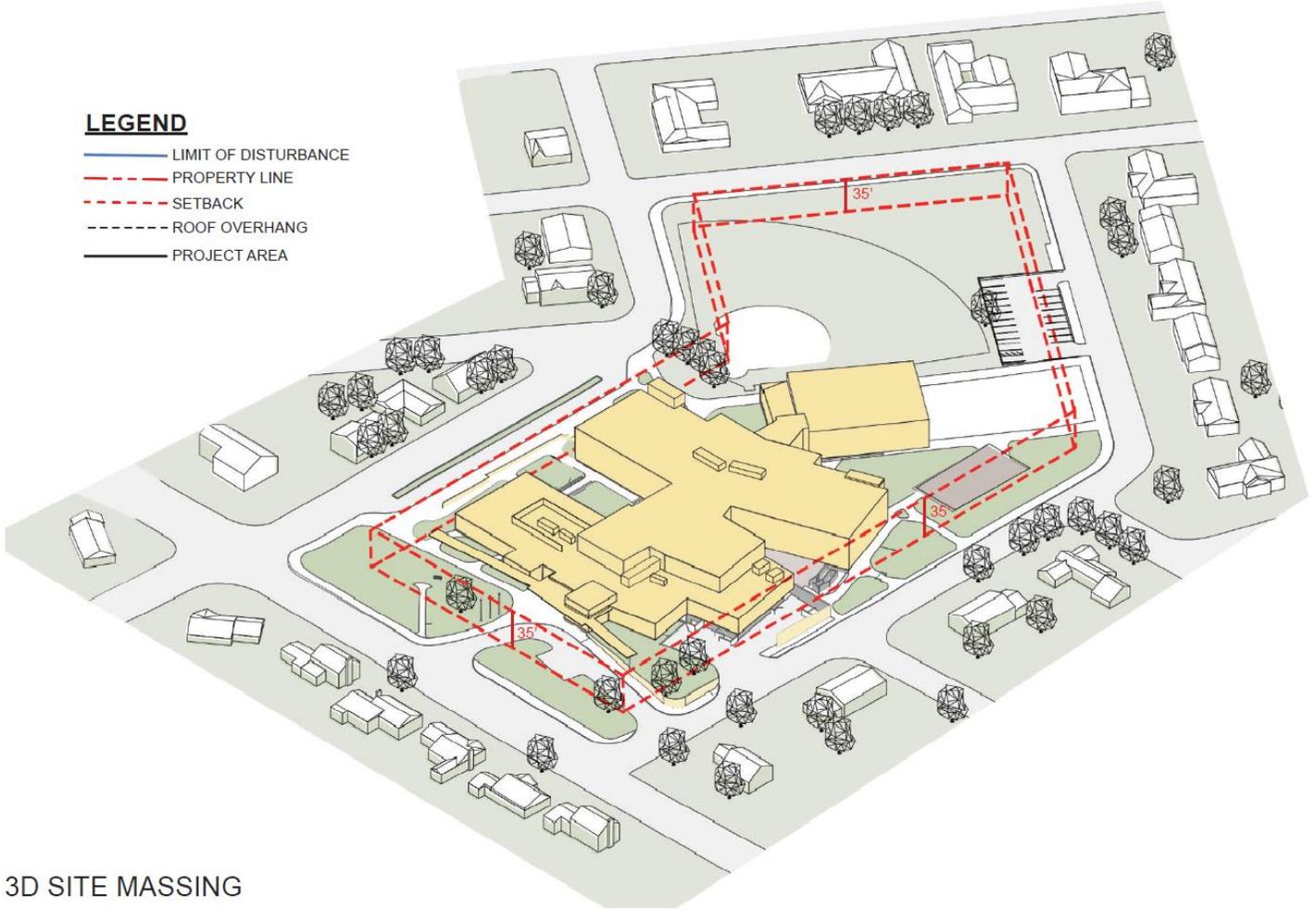


# FUTURE LAND USE MAP





# 3-D SITE MASSING



3D SITE MASSING

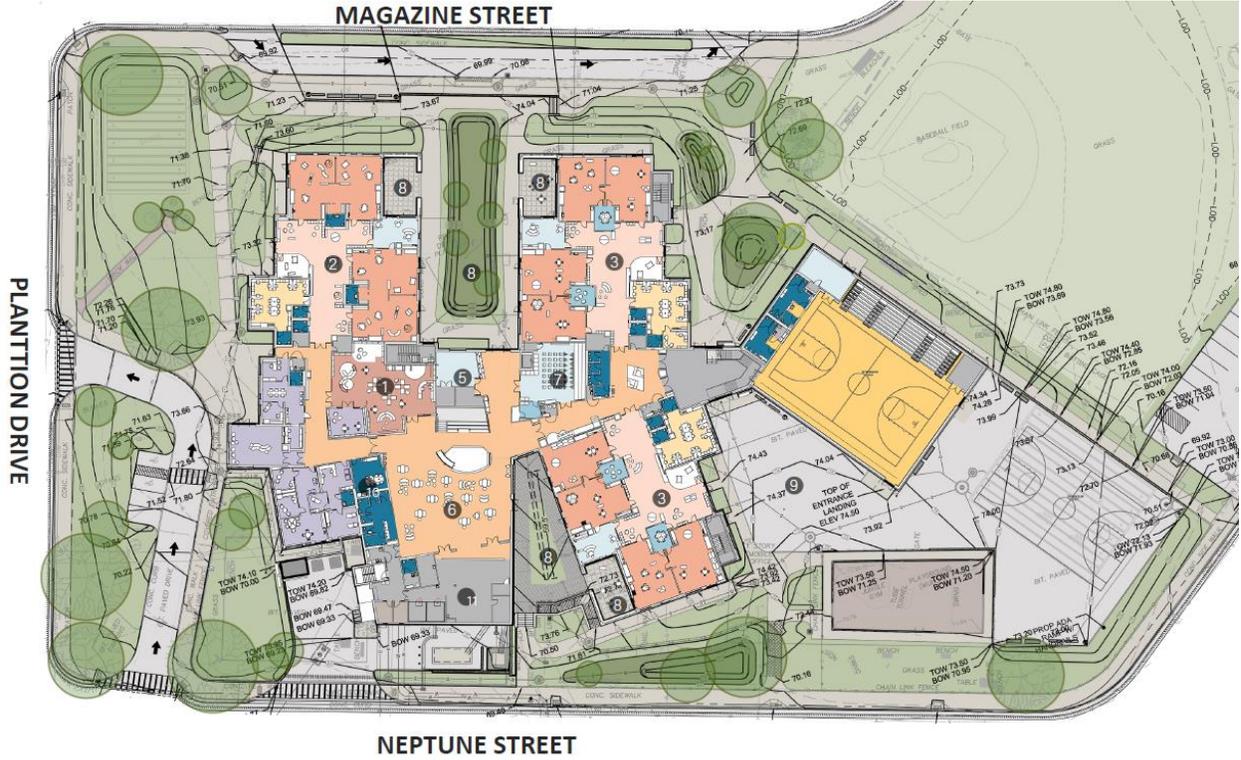
**PERSPECTIVE RENDERING – BIRDS EYE**



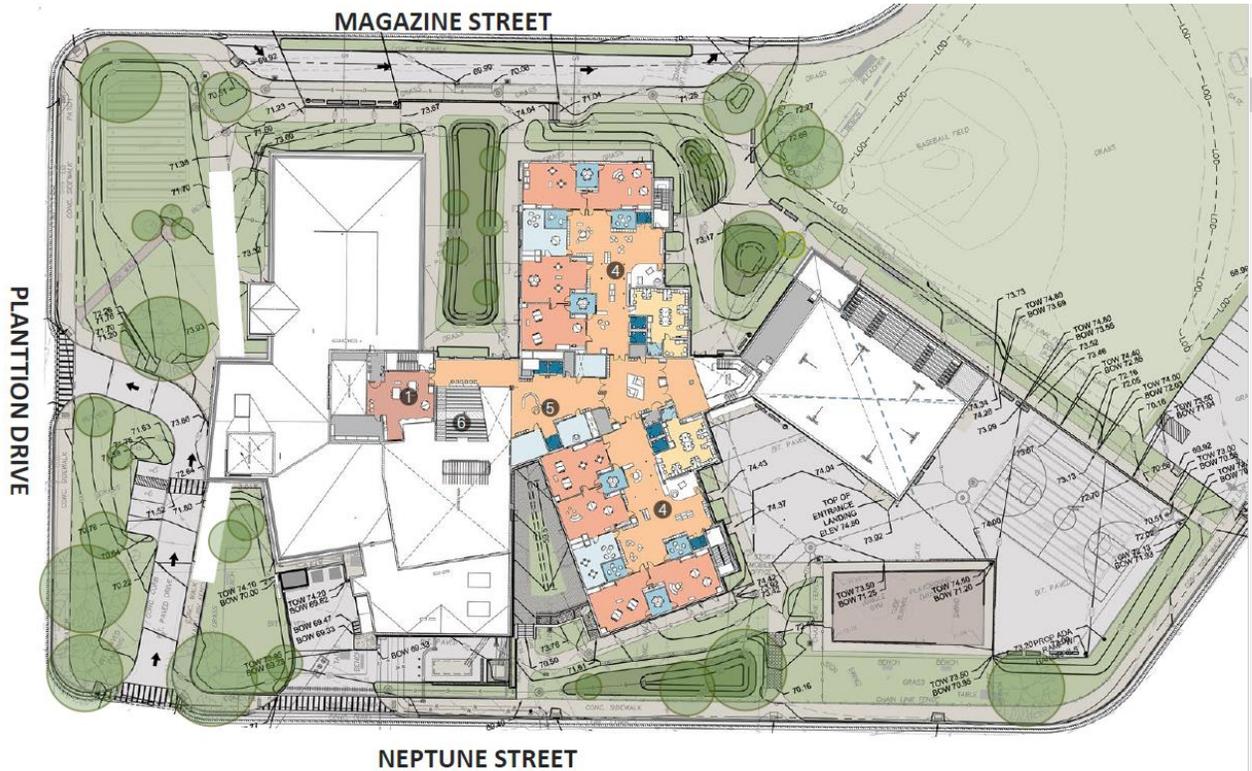
**PERSPECTIVE RENDERING – FRONT ENTRANCE**



# FLOOR PLAN – FIRST FLOOR



# FLOOR PLAN – SECOND FLOOR



## **II. Documents which are part of the Preliminary Plan application and available on the Planning Department webpage:**

1. Preliminary Plan application form and checklist.
2. 100' radius map and list of abutters.
3. Plan set entitled "Permitting Plans for Garden City Elementary School" prepared by Commonwealth Engineers and Consultants, P.E.; Timothy Behan, last revisions dated June 2021.
4. Perspective renderings and architectural details prepared by Fielding International.
5. Stormwater Management Report prepared by Commonwealth Engineers and Consultants, P.E.; Timothy Behan
6. Traffic Impact Assessment Study Summary Report prepared by Commonwealth Engineers and Consultants.
7. Memo of project code compliance and life safety (file named "Narrative bldg code compliance) prepared by Fielding International.
8. Memo of Parking Variance Request (file named "timeline memo") prepared by Commonwealth Engineers and Consultants.
9. Memo of Building Height Variance Request and Clarification (file named "Narrative bldg height") prepared by Fielding International.
10. Memo of Previous Community Engagement Process (file named "timeline memo") prepared by Fielding International.
11. Applicant response to public comments prepared by Cranston School District.

## **III. Surrounding land use and context**

Analysis using the City of Cranston Geographic Information System indicates that:

1. The project site is approximately 5.75 acres in size.
2. The subject site is currently occupied by the existing Garden City Elementary School to be demolished.
3. The subject site is also host to existing "memorial" park and playground space to be retained.
4. The subject site and all abutting parcels are zoned A-8 (Residential with at least 8,000 sq.ft.).

## **IV. Staff / Agency Comments**

Pursuant to RIGL 45-23-41 A3, these plans were distributed for comment to, Public Works Department / Engineering Division / Traffic Safety Division, Building and Zoning Department and the Fire Department. The above parties were involved in the Development Plan Review of the application which received DPR preliminary plan approval for meeting all regulatory as well as health and safety issues. There were no notable concerns offered by the above parties as part of the DPR preliminary plan review process and no further comment on the project was provided.

## **V. Interests of Others**

Staff have received public comments on this application from Morris Bochner, who's comments consisted of submitting three (3) letters that had previously been provided to

various City Officials. Mr. Bochner's letters are provided for Plan Commission review on the Planning Department webpage along with other project materials. Mr. Bochner also provided oral comments in opposition to this project at the pre-application meeting in front of the Plan Commission on July 6, 2021.

## **VI. Waivers**

No waivers have been requested as part of this project.

## **VII. Planning Analysis**

The following text represents a small portion of the narrative information provided by the applicant. In an effort to concisely describe the project and the critical issues pertinent for Major Land Development consideration, staff has transmitted the following text for Plan Commission review.

### Overview:

Garden City Elementary School was originally built in 1953 and was enlarged in 1958 with an additional wing. This existing structure is approximately 30,000 sq.ft. as a single story structure and houses 309 students. The proposed new school will be approximately 85,000 sq.ft. and will house 550 students. The proposed design features a single story section in roughly the same area as the original structure and then steps up to two stories of "learning communities", featuring a double height interior "social heart" space for dining, school events and a central library. These spaces and the classroom settings connect to fenced outdoor classrooms, landscape and recreation areas, and the building is internally connected to a new gymnasium building with hardcourt and exercise rooms as well as public amenities for sporting events. The gym structure is designed to be operational when the school is closed so that it can serve both the school and community recreation opportunities during off -school hours. There are a number of exiting "memorial" amenities on the overall property, such as ball fields, gardens, benches, and playgrounds that are being preserved in place and will continue to function as a community asset.

### Traffic:

Garden City Elementary School is located in the heart of a residential neighborhood surrounded primarily by single-family homes. The roadways around the school are local roads with "generous" geometry (wide lanes with paved shoulders), good sight distances and numerous intersections controlled by stop signs; these are mainly used by the residents who live in the area, and the traffic volumes are low.

This neighborhood is roughly centered between Route 2 (New London Avenue, approximately four (4) blocks west) and Pontiac Avenue (approximately five (5) blocks east). Both Route 2, a four (4) travel arterial running north and south, and Pontiac Avenue, a two (2) lane arterial running north and south, are major commercial and transit corridors in the city. The school is also located near the Garden City and Chapel View shopping plazas.

According to the applicant's observations, most parents currently drop off/pick up their children on Magazine Street (north side of school), while a smaller number of parents drop off/pick up on Plantation Drive (west side of school) and Neptune Street (south side of school), as well as on nearby streets and roadways. There are no on-site parking spaces for teachers or other school staff, so most of them park on both sides of Neptune Street.

According to the the observations, there are currently no obvious or significant traffic deficiencies at Garden City Elementary School. The new school will increase the capacity of students from approximately 300 to 550 which will increase the number of vehicle trips to the property. However, the proposed on-site traffic improvements, consisting of two (2) dedicated staff parking areas and a dedicated student loading lane along Magazine Street, will be an appreciable improvement over the current staff parking and student drop-off/pick-up process, and it is anticipated that they, along with the design/procedural measures described above, will offset any potentially adverse traffic impacts related to the increase in student population at the school.

#### Parking:

Garden City Elementary School currently serves approximately 300 students, with a regular staff of forty-four (44) educators, administrators and support personnel. Based on Section 17.64.010 "Off-street parking" of the City's Zoning Ordinance, one (1) on-site parking space is required for each two (2) staff members at the school; this equates to twenty-two (22) required parking spaces. Presently, there are only two (2) on-site spaces located on the west side of the bus drop-off driveway from Neptune Street. They are nominally marked/posted as ADA spaces, but neither conforms to applicable geometric and accessible path standards to be so classified; however, the fact that they are designated as ADA spaces typically precludes most staff from using them. The majority of school staff parking therefore occurs as street-side parallel parking along the sidewalks adjacent to the school, particularly along Neptune Street. The applicant's observations of the school and parking during typical school-day conditions did not note any specific problems or apparent deficiencies with the current on-street parking.

The proposed demolition and replacement of the Garden City Elementary School will increase the student capacity to 550 students, with a corresponding increase in regular staffing to ninety (90). At the one (1) space/two (2) employees ratio, this equates to forty-five (45) required on-site spaces, which is an increase of twenty-three (23) spaces above the current requirement. The proposed site design includes the construction of a new twenty (20) space parking lot along the eastern leg of Neptune Street, between the proposed school playground (to the west), baseball field (to the north), and neighborhood play area (to the east). It also includes the creation of four (4) new spaces along the left (west) side of the existing bus drop-off driveway, roughly opposite the main entrance to the school. Additionally, two (2) ADA compliant spaces will be provided in each parking area, with both of the twenty (20) space parking lot spaces being van-accessible. This exceeds the requirements of ADA. Therefore, the design proposes the creation of twenty-four (24) on-site parking spaces, which leaves twenty-one (21) required on-site spaces that will not be provided under the proposed design.

It is anticipated and intended that those parking spaces shall continue to be available as street-side parking along the adjacent streets. In order to validate this approach, the

applicant evaluated the available street-side spaces along streets where parking is allowed under proposed conditions, using the following parameters:

- Twenty-two (22) foot total stall length, comprised of eighteen (18) foot space and four (4) foot buffer.
- No parking allowed adjacent to driveways, the loading area or ADA sidewalk ramps.
- Parking only in areas without parking restrictions (see below).

It is noted that Per Zoning Ordinance Section 10.32.350 - No parking on certain streets—Near schools when school in session, the following parking restrictions currently exist on the streets around Garden City Elementary School: Between the hours of 8:00 a.m. and 4:00 p.m. on days when Garden City School is in session, no vehicle shall remain standing for any period of time on the following streets:

- Magazine Street, north side, in front of the premises numbered 41 Magazine Street.
- Magazine Street, south side, from Plantation Drive easterly for a distance of three hundred fifty (350) feet.
- Plantation Drive, easterly side, between Magazine Street and Neptune Drive.

There are no restrictions on parking along either Neptune Street or Kearney Street; therefore, the available space on each is as follows:

- Neptune Street: 595 linear feet = 25 spaces
- Kearney Street: 248 linear feet = 11 spaces
- Total Available Street-Side Parking: 36 spaces
- Total Available On-Site & Street-Side Parking: 24 on-site + 36 street-side = 60 total spaces, 4 ADA

The applicant has provided a rationale for why additional acreage of the property was not dedicated to increase the amount of on-site parking in order to meet the City's code. In summary, the applicant has attempted to balance the needs of the property, which is to account for a necessary increase to the size of the school structure, the need to maintain some of the existing "memorial" community amenities, and the need to provide for some amount of on-site parking.

Specifically, the design of the new school requires the expansion to 550 students and 90 staff, and as a result the proposed size of the new school building is what is required to accommodate that number of students. The proposed site design includes a number of elements that are necessary to the general and educational function of the school, including the playground area adjacent to the gymnasium, the loading area off Neptune Street, and the dedicated student drop-off lane along Magazine Street. There are a number of existing ancillary site elements within the school parcel that are of a significant and sensitive nature to the school and the broader community, which have been prioritized to be preserved; these include the memorial brick walkway and bench along Plantation Drive, the memorial playground along Neptune Street, the baseball field, and the community play area at the intersection of Neptune Street and Kearney Street.

After excluding these various necessary elements from the area available for parking on the lot, proposed on-site parking has been provided both off of Neptune Street, and along the existing (to remain) bus drop-off driveway. These parking areas have been designed to provide the maximum number of spaces possible that comply with City of Cranston parking standards and applicable ADA requirements.

It should be noted that the adjacent Neptune Street and Kearney Street do have sufficient space to accommodate more than the required off-street parking for what is expected as a result of this school improvement. The adjacent streets are currently, and have historically, been used for the vast majority of the staff parking at the school. The use of on-street parking for school staff is not unique to Garden City Elementary School among the schools in the Cranston Public School District; many other neighborhood schools around the City rely heavily on street-side parking for their staff.

Building Height:

There is one small section of the building that exceeds the maximum height requirement of 35 feet as defined by the zoning code. In the north east corner of the building, a single stairway extends above the roof for maintenance access purposes. In this one case, the height is forty feet 40'-0" above grade. Please see the diagram below for additional visual context the stairway (labeled "NE Stair Tower")



At the NE Stair Tower location of the building (where the height exceeds the zoning maximum), the structure is sixty feet from the property line (40 ft more than the required 20 ft yard setback) and is only an additional five feet of height to be over 35 feet. Additionally, it is located towards the center of the property along Magazine Street. The

stair enclosure is not near any adjacent properties, and only faces an adjacent baseball field, therefore we do not see that this is creating any harm to nearby residences. The relief for the height will also greatly benefit the functionality of the building as the stair is also the primary roof access for maintenance and provides a safe path for maintenance staff. Staff is of the view that the requested relief is appropriate and well-mitigated based on the above rationale.

## VIII. Findings of Fact

An orderly, thorough and expeditious technical review of this Preliminary Plan has been conducted. Property owners within a 100' radius have been notified first class mail prior to the public meeting, and the meeting agenda has been properly posted.

Staff has reviewed the Preliminary Plan application for conformance with required standards set forth in RIGL Section 45-23-60, as well as the City of Cranston's Subdivision and Land Development Regulations.

*RIGL § 45-23-60. Procedure – Required findings. (a)(1) states, “The proposed development is consistent with the comprehensive community plan and/or has satisfactorily addressed the issues where there may be inconsistencies.”*

1. The proposed redevelopment of the existing school is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan – Future Land Use Map designation of the parcel as “Government/Institutional” because this designation is suitable for the public school uses as being proposed.
2. Significant cultural, historic or natural features that contribute to the attractiveness of the community will not be unduly negatively impacted through this proposal.

*RIGL § 45-23-60. Procedure – Required findings. (a)(2) states, “The proposed development is in compliance with the standards and provisions of the municipality's zoning ordinance.”*

3. The proposed redevelopment of the existing school is compliant with the *majority* of the zoning provisions currently in place for this parcel of land. The proposed two (2) variances for parking and building height make up the only requests for relief from the zoning code. It is understood that the applicant has submitted a corresponding variance application, and if such application is approved then this negative finding is converted into a positive finding of compliance with the zoning ordinance.

*RIGL § 45-23-60. Procedure – Required findings. (a)(3) states, “There will be no significant negative environmental impacts from the proposed development as shown on the **final** plan, with all required conditions for approval.” (emphasis added)*

4. The current site is developed as a school building and surrounding public amenities such as a ballfield and playground. The proposed development will bring the site drainage infiltration into current standards and provide improvements in this regard. currently exists on the site. The project is subject to all local, state and federal standards regarding environmental impacts. At this point, staff finds that there will be

no significant negative environmental impacts from the proposed development as shown on the plan.

5. The Rhode Island November 2018 Natural Heritage map shows that there are no known rare species located on the site.

*RIGL § 45-23-60. Procedure – Required findings. (a)(4) states, “The subdivision, as proposed, will not result in the creation of individual lots with any physical constraints to development that building on those lots according to pertinent regulations and building standards would be impracticable. (See definition of Buildable lot). Lots with physical constraints to development may be created only if identified as permanent open space or permanently reserved for a public purpose on the approved, recorded plans.”*

6. The proposed project does not incorporate a subdivision of land or any improvements that would create physical constraints to development such that future building would be impracticable.
7. The design and location of building lots, utilities, drainage and other improvements conform to local regulations for mitigation of flooding and soil erosion.

*RIGL § 45-23-60. Procedure – Required findings. (a)(5) states, “All proposed land developments and all subdivision lots have adequate and permanent physical access to a public street. Lot frontage on a public street without physical access shall not be considered in compliance with this requirement.”*

8. The property in question has adequate permanent physical access from XXX, all being improved public roadways located directly around the subject parcel.

## **IX. Recommendation**

Based on the numerous submittal documents received, staff finds this proposal consistent with the standards for required findings of fact set forth in RIGL Section 45-23-60 as well as with the City of Cranston’s Subdivision and Land Development Regulations. Further, staff finds that the application has successfully demonstrated mitigation strategies for potential impacts to traffic and parking. Staff therefore recommends that the Planning Commission adopt the documented findings of fact and **approve** the Preliminary Plan application, subject to the conditions denoted below.

## **X. Conditions of approval**

1. The project shall receive subsequent approval from the Zoning Board of Review for the two (2) variance requests. Failing such approval, the applicant may seek a minor amendment to revise the plans in order to meet the required zoning provisions.