



TO: Zeeland City Planning Commission
FROM: Paul M. LeBlanc, AICP
DATE: June 2, 2014
SUBJECT: Institutional Growth Boundary

Purpose

Recently, Zeeland Christian School and nearby Faith Church requested vacation of a portion of Jefferson Street to accommodate expansion of the school facility and parking for both the school and church. While the street vacation was approved, this request prompted city leaders to consider where the line should be drawn relative to further expansion of these uses into the surrounding neighborhood.

As a result, LSL has been asked to examine the neighborhood around Zeeland Christian School to determine an appropriate boundary for future expansion of the school facility and, possibly, other institutional and non-residential uses in the area.

Historically, integrating churches and schools within neighborhoods was ideal, considered part of the neighborhood fabric. People weren't as mobile, walkability was the norm and the scale of the institutions was in character with the surroundings. However, contemporary lifestyles allow (even depend on) greater mobility. People are willing to drive longer distances, resulting in expanded service areas. In addition, churches and schools have evolved into more diverse service providers. Church activity is no longer confined to Sundays. Schools have become community centers, offering a variety of activities well beyond the traditional classroom hours. This has resulted in the need for expanded facilities (building and parking). Unlike such uses that have been erected on spacious sites in newly developing locations, the Zeeland Christian School and Faith Church facilities, in particular, are hemmed in on all sides by established neighborhoods.

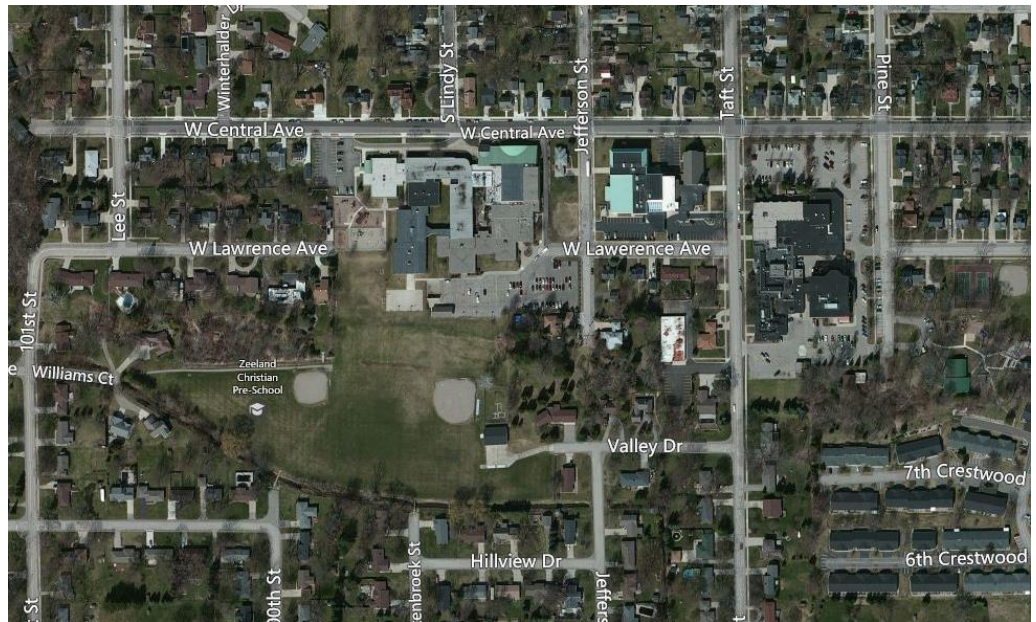
Existing Conditions

The several blocks surrounding the school are comprised predominantly of single family homes, though there are several churches, schools, offices and a park interspersed throughout the area. While the neighborhood is mature, it is well-maintained and boasts attractive modest homes along tree-lined streets. Sidewalks are in evidence and accommodate an easy walk to downtown and other nearby attractions.

In addition to the Christian School and Faith Church, other institutional and non-residential uses are found in the immediate neighborhood. The most prominent of these is the former Zeeland Community Hospital property two blocks east of the school. A victim of limited land to accommodate needed expansion, the hospital relocated to a new site and the campus has been converted to City on a Hill, a collection of non-profit and social service agency offices. A remnant of the days when the hospital was still operating in the neighborhood, a medical office building is sited in the center of the residential

block immediately south of Faith Church. This single story building is surrounded on all four sides by single family homes.

It is evident that the current Zeeland Christian School is the product of multiple expansions over time. The building exhibits signs of periodic additions; parking lots are not interconnected; and circulation is inefficient. The site is bordered on the north by Central Avenue and the south by a sizable drain. The eastern



boundary is Jefferson Street and on the west the border is defined by a cluster of established single family homes. The land south of the school building and paved parking area drops off dramatically and is occupied by sports playfields and a maintenance building. One single family home, located at the southwest corner of Central Avenue and Jefferson is owned by the school and will be removed to accommodate added parking as part of the Jefferson Street vacation. Three other homes line the west side of Jefferson, between Lawrence and the drain. These remain in private ownership. Four homes line the east side of Jefferson in this same area.

Considerations

The current and potential conflicts between the various non-residential uses and the surrounding neighborhood were highlighted in the City’s 2011 Master Plan. This issue is described as “creating a tension within the neighborhood between the institutions and the single family homeowners.” [p.30]

As noted above, the scale and character of these institutional uses are no longer compatible with the community that existed decades ago. Traffic, expansive parking, increased activity, noise and further intrusion into the neighborhood are tearing at the residential fabric.

In order to protect the integrity and property values of the single family neighborhood while remaining sensitive to the needs of the established institutional uses, balance and predictability are needed. Without a defined limit for future non-residential intrusion, uncertainty will plague the residents and may inhibit future investment in property maintenance or cause a decline in property values.

Incremental nibbling away at the edges of the neighborhood is not a desirable strategy or acceptable public policy for sustaining the value and integrity of the neighborhood.

Recommendation

The following recommendations are offered for your consideration.

1. No further expansion of the Faith Church or City on a Hill should be permitted beyond their current property limits. Building expansion may be permitted onto existing parking lots; provided, shared parking agreements are entered into with neighboring non-residential uses and/or other accommodations are made to off-set the lost parking spaces.
2. The existing medical office building in the center of the block south of Faith Church should be rezoned to R-1 Residential, consistent with the rest of the block. While this would make the office use nonconforming, it would prevent future expansion and possibly incentivize its reclamation to a residential use. Given its lack of visibility and the relocation of the hospital, this is no longer a desirable use in this setting.

3. Future property acquisition by Zeeland Christian School should be restricted to the three remaining homes currently abutting the school site, along the west side of



Jefferson Street. These homes lie south of the existing parking lot and north of the drain which serves as the southern boundary of the school property. This would establish Jefferson Street as the eastern boundary for the school and the drain as the southern boundary. It should be noted, however, that due to the topographic variation, this area may be best suited for parking or athletic fields rather than building expansion. In any event, the decision whether or not to sell the homes to the school would remain the decision of the home owners. Any further expansion beyond this should be limited to the property already owned and occupied by the school.

