

**Response To Planning Commission
Issues/Questions in 7/18/02 Memo to Borough Council**

To: Swarthmore Borough Planning Commission

From: Swarthmore College Land Use Planning Committee

Date: October 3, 2002

We thank the Planning Commission for this opportunity to clarify the College's thoughts concerning the *Land Use Analysis* that we presented to the Borough in February 2002. We believe that continued discussion between the Borough and the College is the best way to work towards a more effective land plan for both entities. We very much appreciate the spirit in which these questions/issues have been raised and look forward to a continued dialogue.

There were twenty issues raised in the July 18, 2002, memo from the Planning Commission to Borough Council. Not all of the questions are directed at the College. It is the College's goal here to provide as much clarification as is possible and answer the specific questions directed to the College. This response is organized into three major topics:

1. **The Planning and Zoning Process** – responding to questions 1,2,3,4,5,9,10,11, 12, 17.
2. **College Growth and Land Use Changes** – responding to questions 6, 7, 8, 9,11,12,16,18,19,20.
3. **Community and College Planning** – responding to questions 14, 15.

Question numbers are noted in brackets throughout this document.

1. THE PLANNING AND ZONING PROCESS

In February 2002, we provided information to the Planning Commission about the underlying campus planning principles at Swarthmore College. Further, we identified a possible growth scenario that maintains these planning principles even as the College grows. We provided this *Land Use Analysis* in response to your request to us for long range planning information.

The College has not made, nor does it plan to make, a specific zoning request for a specific parcel. The issues under discussion here are broad concepts that relate to changes the Borough may choose to make as part of its overall review of the Borough zoning map. When we received the request for master planning information, we understood that the Planning Commission is considering changes to this zoning map and requested College input to inform that process. We

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believe that the Planning Commission's process for considering non-commercial zoning changes (such as those proposed in the *Land Use Analysis*) should use the same process as is being used for commercial development changes (those used for the Inn) [1.3].

The College's land use plan has been criticized as being vague. We believe the plan was responsive to the request put to the College by the Planning Commission in 2001. Nevertheless, the desire of the Planning Commission to know more is understandable and appropriate. The College will try to elaborate in the narrative below.

The Hinge Block

The impact of College buildings on the "hinge block" (the block bounded by Chester, Elm, Cedar and College) depends on the type of development permitted by the Borough. The College has three basic uses of its buildings –academic, administrative, and residential (faculty and students). We believe that all three of these uses can be appropriate for the hinge block. We understand, however, that the Borough might restrict uses in certain areas. The College is open to hearing all concerns regarding use.

The College has not designed a layout for the hinge block. We believe zoning or overlay restrictions should be established as a first step. If there are certain uses the Borough feels are not appropriate on this block, these uses should be specified. The Borough might decide to place restrictions on building size. For instance, in certain areas, residential structures of an attached town home style might be preferred. In others, buildings whose footprint does not exceed 15,000 square feet (as an example) might be recommended. Restrictions on height or setback are also possible. Requirements for a certain amount of green space (by design or percentage coverage) might be identified. As another possibility, the Commission might decide to leave one area of the block undeveloped and allow more intense building in another zone. Still another variation might give the highest priority to maintaining historically designated structures. For the College to pick any one of these ideas and come to the Borough as if it had a defined plan to which it was committed is impossible. We have tried to begin an open-ended dialogue with the Borough on this issue and wish to continue to identify the Borough's concerns and the opportunities presented by the College's ideas [2, 10].

Another factor in determining the impact of the "hinge" block on residential areas is to consider its current relationship of the private homes on the block. The current density of residences on the block is much lower than nearby blocks. The hinge block is bounded on two sides by the College and on one side by the main thoroughfare through town. It is our hope that by focusing attention on this block,

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the College can preserve the residential scale of the blocks along Elm Avenue going towards and past Whittier Place [4].

Contextual Scale

Our Land Use Analysis suggested development at a *contextual scale* for the hinge block as well as for other parcels on Harvard. What we mean by contextual scale is new structures that are similar to the nearby buildings in scale and height. We consider our three residence halls on Chester Road (Pittenger, Palmer and Roberts) to be good examples of contextual scale for that area. Bryn Mawr College's addition to an existing home for their admissions office is another example of an institutional use in a contextual scale.

It is our recommendation that the Planning Commission discuss zoning changes for the hinge block in the same manner used to craft an overlay district for the inn site. In that case, the Planning Commission drafted a proposal after understanding the needs of the developer and the College. Through its own work and interaction with the College and developer, the Commission ensured that the priorities of the Borough came first, but in a way that met the basic needs of the College and the developer. The College will listen to and discuss appropriate and reasonable restrictions on the hinge block or other areas, including setbacks, coverage restrictions, height limits, green way set-asides, or other planning tools [17].

Grandfathering of BCC, Ashton House and Woolman House

The Commission's letter also raised the issue of further regulation of Woolman House, Ashton House and the BCC (the Robinson House). These uses have co-existed with their neighbors exceptionally well for decades. If the Borough determines that additional rules are now required for some reason, we would like to understand the concerns of the Borough and neighbors. From discussions over the years, our experience indicates that the neighbors feel that the BCC, Ashton House and Woolman do not detract from the neighborhood [9].

2. COLLEGE GROWTH AND LAND USE CHANGES

The Board of Managers and the President of the College have determined that the College will continue to have important and significant new needs for educational, residential and recreational facilities in the future. Both enrollment growth and increasing programmatic needs have, and will continue to, drive space needs.

A look at the past can inform planning for the future. We note that the Borough Revitalization Committee spent a great deal of time understanding the historic and continuing pressures on small towns before making recommendations for the

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Borough. Relying on this historic analysis, the Revitalization Committee was able to suggest a plan that was pro-active in preserving the vitality of the business district. Similarly, the College has reviewed historic data to allow it to be pro-active in its planning. We have projected future needs by understanding trends and pressures in the higher education field in general as well as those at our college in particular.

Enrollment Growth – One Driver for Expansion

The College's need for land use flexibility is certainly related to the likelihood of increased enrollment over time. Several questions posed by the Planning Commission address this specific issue. It is understandable that questions would arise in this area, as the economic and educational factors related to enrollment are often not apparent to those outside of academic administration. Enrollment is a complex and sensitive issue for the College. Alumni, no matter what year of graduation, all fondly remember an institution that is smaller than our present enrollment. Those who graduated thirty years ago attended a College with an enrollment of 1163. Those that graduated fifty years ago remember a school of 900 students. A graph of enrollment over time, with data from various sources, is posted on the Land Use Planning Committee website, <http://landuse.swarthmore.edu>. This graph clearly shows linear growth per year since the College's founding [6].

Despite its enrollment growth, Swarthmore remains an intimate place. We are small in comparison to other co-educational, liberal arts colleges. Amherst College enrolls 1682 students; Williams, 2200. Swarthmore, Williams and Amherst are recognized as three of the highest quality liberal arts colleges in the world. Despite the strong desire of each to restrain growth, the pressures to enlarge the student body are immense and there is no sign that these pressures will disappear. Factors that affect growth include:

- *Growth of the Curriculum:* As academic offerings change, growth occurs. Faculty are added to teach new subjects, and in order to maintain a constant student faculty ratio, additional students are gradually enrolled. Swarthmore's student - to -faculty ratio is very low compared to other schools. Our ratio is eight students to one faculty (8:1). Growth of one field does not translate into the reduction or elimination of another. We added computer science to the curriculum several years ago. No departments were eliminated when this addition was made. We believe it is vital to maintain a healthy department of Classics *and* a healthy department of Computer Science. To make this happen, sufficient numbers of students must study in each field.
- *Our Commitment to Diversity:* Over 500 students of color and another one hundred international students are now part of our student body. As our reputation grows, we wish to attract the best and brightest national and

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international students. This commitment has led to an increase in enrollment in order to offer admission to a broader group of students.

- *Intercollegiate Athletics:* The College fields over twenty separate inter-collegiate athletic teams. There are well over two hundred students on campus at any one time who have been recruited for participation on one or another inter-collegiate athletic team. 750 students participate in athletic clubs, intramurals and varsity sports. A large quantity of sports offerings brings diversity and vitality to student life and helps to maintain Swarthmore's standing as compared to other colleges. This broad athletic offering must be supported by a student pool of sufficient size and adequate athletic facilities, including playing fields.

The ability of the College to finance new buildings, the ever-changing population of the appropriate age cohort, the future demand for the services the College provides, and the growth of knowledge all play a role in enrollment projections. Given the wide range of factors affecting growth, it is impossible to predict with accuracy the rate of growth of enrollment over time. Nevertheless, we find that historic data shows a slow but steady growth since the founding of the College almost 140 years ago. The College has grown incrementally in every period of its history, adding an average of 11.2 students per year. All the factors responsible for that past growth remain active today [6].

Other Growth Pressures

Enrollment growth is not the only reason that the College has a need to add facilities. Even if the number of students were to remain near constant, the growth in the number of programs, the change in the way disciplines are taught, and certain legal and code requirements require the expansion of facilities. We expect our library collection to continue to grow incrementally. Our expanding media program will have space requirements. In our new integrated science building, each discipline requires additional space to accommodate the growth in independent student projects. We are also pressured by demands that decrease space available for academic use. In the renovation of Parrish Hall (presently being planned), we anticipate a loss of approximately 9,000 net usable square feet due to the insertion of new mechanical and building systems such as large air handlers, elevators and water pumps for the new sprinkler system. As a final example, nearly every outdoor sport that used to play during only one season (either the fall or spring) now competes during both seasons. The number of playing fields required to support athletics has thus significantly increased.

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On Campus Growth

Many of the College's future needs can be met by building on land now zoned institutional and without violating the principles and values set forth in the *Land Use Analysis*. A good example is a new biology building. This need has been identified although a plan does not yet exist. Pending further analysis, this structure may be most appropriate near the new science center that is now under construction -- possibly on the site of the old rugby field. Another example is a future addition to McCabe Library, which would likely be located adjacent to the existing library. McCabe was constructed over thirty years ago with a capacity for book storage that was to expire by the year 2000.

We have identified four growth sites on the campus center that can be developed in sympathy with the overall campus plan. Three of these sites fill in vacant areas of the main lawn and the other is the former rugby field site. These sites can provide growth space for the College. Each space, however, is limited and each space is appropriate for only one or two specific building types. In each case, our initial analysis indicates that construction can be accommodated without detracting from our overall green space and campus plan [7, 8].

Other Growth Locations

The existing zoning that governs College land requires either institutional use (with no modifier for contextual scale) or single-family residential use. The Cunningham Fields, as an example, are zoned for institutional use. The lower (south) campus fields are also zoned institutional. Although both areas are large parcels capable of accommodating many buildings, we must weigh our needs for athletic fields against the need for building sites. We need open space for athletics just as we need buildings for academics. Additionally, we see the value of fields, especially the Cunningham Fields, to the community. The open space at this busy intersection of Chester and College provides a visual break along Chester Road, a buffer for the elementary school and informal recreational space for walkers and others in the community. When College games happen on this site, they are visible to the community and thus provide a linkage between the school and the community.

As we review our alternatives for growth in the future (once the sites on the campus core are used), we will examine where we can build given municipal restrictions. Without other alternatives, the case to develop these fields will be increasingly compelling [7, 9].

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Historic Preservation

The values and principles identified in the *Land Use Analysis* assume that the College will continue to occupy its existing buildings without consideration of demolition and replacement of major buildings on campus. This is not to say that no structure will ever be appropriate to remove, but as a long term strategy for growth, it is not foreseeable or appropriate [16].

Open Space Preservation

The College owns over 300 acres of land in Swarthmore, Springfield, and Nether Providence. The desire to preserve this land has certainly influenced our *Land Use Analysis*. Development of this land to the maximum build-out permitted by zoning is not in the interests of the College community, nor of any of the boroughs or townships involved. We believe there are important open and wooded areas that are critical to preserve. The College's effort to preserve natural areas is beneficial to the larger community as well. The charge has been leveled at the College that it is more concerned with plants than people. In our view, this accusation misses the point. The preservation of green space is not important for some abstract reason. It is a quality of life issue for every person. This open space distinguishes Swarthmore Borough from nearby towns. The ideas represented in the College's *Land Use Analysis* attempt to balance the need for additional buildings and recreational areas, the importance of preserving green spaces and preservation of the essential residential nature of the Borough. All three of these things are critical. Ignoring any one is not tenable in the end.

The campus is a resource not just to those who go to school here but also to the entire community, and preserving the fundamental quality of the campus is in the interest of everyone. The Crum Woods are one of the only remaining natural woodlands in the entire region and preserving its health is vital to issues such as water and air quality, and bio-diversity; they also serve as a sound buffer between the Borough and Route 476. The College considers its role as steward of this resource to be very important.

In a similar way, the campus serves the whole community as a park and an arboretum. It is no one's interest to fill this community resource with buildings too tightly configured or spread out across open spaces [7, 18].

Parking and Vehicular Traffic

Several questions were raised about traffic and parking. We believe these issues have more to do with existing issues than any new traffic problems that might be created by changes in the zoning map. Parking is certainly an issue on campus now as it is in the business district. We are using an excessive amount of open space for on-grade parking. Our land use plan considers decked parking lots, up

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to two and one-half stories above grade. One would be on the north campus, near the new science center. Another might be part of the Inn development. These garages will not reduce traffic off any particular street. Both, however, will provide parking in compact, efficient settings. We do not plan to use any public parking resources to satisfy our internal parking requirements. Conversely, we have proposed to meet some of the Borough's needs on College property near the Inn development.

We are, and intend to remain, very strict about parking permits for students. We offer permits to fewer than 10% of the student body. As a residential college located on a train line to a large city, a car is not a necessity for most of our students. We offer van service for student transit to suburban areas and into the city. Most of the car traffic to campus comes from faculty and staff as well as from prospective students and their families visiting the College. The volume of faculty traffic is reduced by our rental and mortgage policies that encourage faculty to live within this community. We continue to assess viable methods to encourage more of our faculty and staff to leave their cars at home.

As a final point on the subject of parking and traffic, we do think the Elm/Chester intersection is a safety problem for everyone due to visibility issues. We would appreciate the opportunity to discuss this intersection and options for enhancements with the Planning Commission [11, 12], 19, 20].

3. COLLEGE / COMMUNITY PLANNING

The vitality of the Borough and the vitality of College are interconnected. To the extent that the College has needs that are important for it to maintain its pre-eminent position in American higher education, the support of the Borough is critical. In turn, if the Borough has needs that are important to maintain its vitality, the College should assist and support the Borough. A close and cooperative working relationship across all levels is important. Every college and host community has a unique relationship, but there is much to be learned from other schools and municipalities in similar circumstances. One suggestion for our path forward is to invite some colleagues from other locales to speak to our college/community group about issues in their hometowns.

The College's interest in the Chester / Elm / Cedar / College Ave. block is not limited to our need to accommodate future space needs. We see this hinge block as an opportunity to enhance the linkage of the Borough and College communities. In its present configuration, the College is oriented inward toward the lawn and other internal campus spaces. Our frontage on Chester Road – the

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Borough's most prominent thoroughfare - is dominated by a parking lot and landscape buffers. The term "hinge" was coined to express the ability of this block to serve as a connection point between the Borough and the College.

A consistent theme in American campus planning over the past two decades is the desire to create a permeable edge between the college and the community. The notion of the college campus as a separate place located behind architectural and landscape barriers is outdated. Colleges have developed or relocated admissions offices, bookstores, residence halls and performing arts centers to the edge of the campus. These projects have created a connection between town and gown that encourages students to walk to the business district and participate in town activities. Welcoming entrances, walking paths and clear signs, help visitors, parents and applicant families comprehend the organization of the campus, and its placement in the town. These edge projects have been successfully used in communities and colleges large and small such as Bryn Mawr College, Cornell University and Colgate University (Hamilton, NY).

The new residence hall and the inn project are both designed to soften the edge between the College and the Borough. The new residence hall will relocate 150 students (now dispersed in locations such as Strath Haven Condominiums and other dorm lounges that have been converted to rooms), to a new building close to the train station and the business district.

Similarly, the Inn will create activity for the town west of Chester Road. The facility will mix Borough residents, students and visitors by providing facilities that attract each [14, 15].

Relation of the Inn to College's Land Use Plan

All College land, especially land zoned institutional such as the Inn parcel, is relevant to the College long-term plans. As we attempt to assess future needs and available space, the law of supply and demand is at work. Every piece of the puzzle is important. That said, as the College has previously stated, there is no one piece that is a trade-off for any other piece of land. The College's decision to move forward or not with the Inn will be made by the Board of Managers. This decision will be based on a number of factors including the financial arrangement structured with the developers, the resolution of traffic and infrastructure design concerns, and approval of land development changes by Borough Council. The totality of circumstances will influence the Board in its decision. If the project does not proceed, then the area in question would be appropriate for additional parking, for residential uses, for administrative functions and for recreational programs [15].

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Benefits to the Borough

In a number of questions, the Planning Commission is asking the College for its opinion as to a cost/benefit analysis of allowing the College additional flexibility on certain parcels of land the College now owns. Obviously, in the end, this is a question for the Planning Commission and Borough Council to answer. We hope that much of what was contained in the Land Use Plan as well as the additional explanations we have provided at this time are persuasive.

The presence of Swarthmore College in the Borough, and the long-run health of the College is central to the health and vitality of the Borough. While there has not been an economic impact statement completed for Swarthmore, these studies have been done many times in many areas of the country. These studies have examined issues that are relevant to this situation: the numbers of jobs created, spending by employees and students, the value of real estate, the quality of the public school system, contributions to the budget for police, fire-safety, infrastructure improvements, and the impact on neighboring areas. Although we have not completed such a study, we can discuss the need and potential impact of a study with the Commission. Even without an economic impact study, it is clear that the campus is central to the life of entire community –the woods, the playing fields, the park-like setting, and cultural events. We think the whole community understands that part of the reason this town is so special is that it not just a college town, but home to one of the best liberal arts colleges in the country. To the extent that the College has needs that will allow it to flourish for the next fifty years, it is in the interest of the Borough to work with us as we seek to meet those needs.

Crum Woods has been discussed earlier in this document. It bears repeating here that the stewardship of the College to this natural area is important to the region, not just the Borough. We wish to see as little development as possible in this area. The campus also serves the whole community as a park located in its center and it is a nationally recognized arboretum.

Certainly, one approach to take is to tell the College it is on its own, that it has land that it can fill up by right and ignore the larger consequences for the whole community –to ignore the possibility that there might be a better way for everyone than exactly what was written as code fifty years ago. We believe that the Borough and the College have an historic opportunity to understand each other's concerns and to develop a vision for the future that is a winning solution for both entities.

The Borough has spent several years now embroiled in an often-difficult process of examining the issue of its long-term health and vitality. As a result, it has

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recommended a series of very significant changes, including the re-building of the Co-op and the creation of a new commercial zone on college land. The College, at the same time and in part due to the Borough's request, has also committed time and study to look forward as well. We presented some initial thinking about the changes our Land Use Planning Committee believes are important to Swarthmore College's long-term health. The Borough and the College have worked with each other extremely well and in a cooperative fashion. This discussion requires additional time, thought and discussion. We stand ready to work through those issues with the Commission to form a vision for the future.