

SEARCH

[Home](#)

Back to the Zoning Board for Charter School

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Photo by Vivienne Chen

On Thursday evening, the South Brunswick Zoning Board began hearing testimony on the engineering plans and traffic study for the new zoning application of the Princeton International Academy Charter School

(PIACS). PIACS withdrew a previous application and is applying again, now that the property on 12 Perrine Road in Monmouth Junction will reportedly no longer be shared with the YingHua International private school.

This new application comes in the wake of a recent ruling against PIACS by the Office of Administrative Law, upholding the South Brunswick, Princeton, and West Windsor-Plainsboro school districts' right to use public funds to oppose the charter school.

Zoning board president Martin Hammer emphasized at the beginning of Thursday's meeting that he did not want the charter school debate to be the focus of the meeting.

"The fact that this is a charter school has absolutely nothing to do with why this application is in front of this board," said Hammer. "We need to solely focus on land-use issues and not engage in any debate over the appropriateness of public versus private versus charter schools."

Counsel for PIACS Edward Boccher laid out the new plan for the opening of

the K- 5 charter school. PIACS plans to start with 170 new students and 40 staff members, eventually expanding to 290 students in a 4-year time frame.

According to William Buzby, who testified to the engineering site plans for the school, PIACS will feature classrooms, a bus drop-off area in front of the site, parent drop-off areas, a fenced-in playground, and 96 parking spaces.

During the meeting, PIACS counsel agreed that the school would pay an off-duty policeman to direct traffic during peak a.m. and p.m. hours at the intersection of Schalks Crossing Road and Perrine Road, in response to concerns about the increase in traffic.

Residents and zoning board members were skeptical whether a single policeman could handle the amount of traffic coming across Schalks Road, and questioned whether the traffic study was conducted during school hours and accounted for winter weather.

Residents and counsel for the school boards also raised concerns about the number of parking spaces being insufficient for school-wide events.

Buzby responded that 96 spaces was more than double the amount required by the zoning ordinance, and that PIACS planned to stagger events such as Back-to-School night, and promised that no school event would require off-site parking.

Attorney for the school boards Kevin Sheenan also questioned civil engineer and traffic study expert Elizabeth Dolan on whether there would be a safe place for children to cross the street to get to school.

“If there was a pedestrian demand, we could have a crossing guard,” Dolan replied. However, she said the current plans do not offer any place for children to walk from Schalks and Perrine to the school site other than along the grass.

PIACS’s attorney Boccher at one point objected the legal standing of the school boards to question the witnesses under the Municipal Land Use law’s definition of an interested property owner.

“We assert that the school district is not an entity whose rights to use, acquire, or enjoy property is affected by any actions the zoning board may take,” said Boccher.

Sheenan responded that the public school’s responsibility of bussing the students to the charter school made them an interested party, since the buses for the charter school would be property of the school board. The zoning board

allowed for questioning, but noted that an appellate court could examine the legal standing of the school boards in the future.

PIACS has faced an uphill battle in trying to build its Mandarin-English language immersion school program. The PIACS legal team will continue its testimony of the planning and architecture of the school.

The next meeting is scheduled for February 23, with potential opportunity for an earlier hearing in mid-January if the zoning board's schedule opens up in time for sufficient public notice.



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