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Foundation looks to reconfigure Van Vleck gardens

Visitors of the Van Vleck House & Gardens would no longer need to cross active driveways as they enjoy a peaceful stroll amongst beds of rhododendrons and azaleas, if the Board of Adjustment signs off on plans submitted by the owner of the 5.8-acre property.



STAFF PHOTO BY ADAM ANIK

The Board of Adjustment is considering a plan that would enable the Van Vleck House & Gardens to add on-site parking and eliminate driveways that cut through the property and interrupt the gardens.

The board began reviewing The Montclair Foundation's application last Wednesday to build a new driveway, parking lot, and storage building and to make other improvements to the site, which is at the corner of North Mountain Avenue and Van Vleck Street and is 80 percent covered by gardens.

Ownership of the house and its grounds was transferred in 1993 from the descendants of horticulturalist Howard Van Vleck, the last member of the Van Vleck family to reside in the mansion, to the foundation.

Three generations of the Van Vleck family had resided in the mansion since it was constructed in 1916. They transformed the property from a farm and apple orchard into gardens complete with a greenhouse and 65 different species of trees the Van Vlecks brought back from their travels across the United States, said Jonne McCarron, the executive director of the foundation.

Now her organization is trying to implement its master plan "to help us complete the transition from a private residence to a public garden," McCarron said, and this application to the township's Board of Adjustment represents the first phase.

In the works since 2005, the foundation's master plan has been shaped by the nationally known firm Rodney Robinson Landscape Architects, based in Delaware, which has also done design work for Greenwood Gardens in Short Hills and Chanticleer Gardens in Wayne, Pa. — both of which are private estates-turned-public gardens.

The initial phase of the Van Vleck redesign "will address better access, better paths, and the elimination of vehicle traffic through the property," which is now "bisected" by two vehicular driveways, McCarron said. The layout is such that visitors could be walking through the gardens and emerge from behind a hedgerow to encounter oncoming cars, she said.

"The plantings go right up to the driveway," said the executive director. "It breaks up the experience of the garden if you have to stop and let cars pass."

Plans the foundation submitted to the Montclair Planning Department also call for increasing the property's on-site parking inventory. The foundation has turned the Van Vleck house into a center for nonprofits, several of which are based on the second floor. Meanwhile, the first floor is used for fundraisers and meetings.

"It is rented out 50 times a year on average" for events that can draw as many as 100 people and result in overflow parking, McCarron said. There are also summer concerts held on the grounds that draw even larger crowds and result in drivers parking throughout the surrounding neighborhood, she noted.

But the sought-after increase in parking should not be misread as an indicator that the foundation is looking to add any additional office space or host more events, said McCarron.

"It is meant to enhance what we have and not to increase the use," she said. "None of our master plan deals with space in the house at all. It deals with the grounds."

The concept presented to the Board of Adjustment calls for a new driveway leading onto the property from North Mountain Avenue. The foundation also hopes to "formalize" a gravel parking lot with roughly 12 spaces at the rear, or southern, edge of the property.

An existing lot at the front of the site would be reworked to include 20 spaces, plus a new handicapped space. That lot would be for the public only, while the rear lot would be for staff members.

In addition, a 4-foot-wide gravel path winding throughout the property would be put in which would "go into areas of the gardens that are not accessible at all," McCarron said.

The construction of a two-story, roughly 28-foot-tall storage building is also part of the plans.

The hearing on the foundation's proposal will continue during the Board of Adjustment's meeting on Wednesday, Feb. 16.

BY DAN PROCHILO
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