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Board unanimously approves improvement plan at Van Vleck

A man in a Homburg hat and Chesterfield coat once walked along North Mountain Avenue. Tall and slim in stature, that proper gentleman was Howard Van Vleck, coming home after tending to his investments in New York City. "They used to say he went in to clip coupons," neighbor Connie Perdue, 85, laughed.



STAFF PHOTO BY ADAM ANIK

The Board of Adjustment last week voted to approve a new site plan for the Van Vleck House & Gardens.

"But when he was gardening," her husband Bob Perdue, 93, chimed in, "he enjoyed dressing down. He wanted to look like a gardener. He wanted the dirt of the earth on his hands."

In his garden in Montclair, the horticulturalist skillfully fostered his cherished rhododendrons, recalled the Perdues, his neighbors since 1956.

Now that improvements are slated for the property, the Perdues are certain Van Vleck's legacy will continue to enrich the town.

The Montclair Board of Adjustment last week unanimously voted to approve a plan submitted by The Montclair Foundation that would no longer require visitors to cross active driveways at the Van Vleck House & Gardens, located off Van Vleck Street between North Mountain and Upper Mountain avenues.

During a hearing on the foundation's proposal last Wednesday, Feb. 16, the site plan application was approved to include improvements to the existing parking area to make it more convenient for pedestrians, and circulation and service areas on the 5.7-acre property.

"He wanted this to be enjoyed by other people. This was something I think he had a dream about," Bob Perdue said.

A parking area will be constructed for staff and tenants that would be accessed through a new driveway from North Mountain Avenue at the south end of the property.

The cost of the improvements are being covered by contributions from private donors, said Jerry Raymond, former chairman of The Montclair Foundation and current member of the Van Vleck Board of Management. Work will start "right away" on pathways and a new entrance, noted Raymond.

The intent of the work is not to increase usage of the facility, but rather to further preserve the house and gardens and make the area more pedestrian-friendly, said Raymond and architect Paul Sionas.

A new garden building to provide a shelter for equipment was initially planned to be nearly 30 feet tall, but the board restricted it to a one-story, 16-foot tall structure.

Other improvements include an information kiosk with a copper roof that will be installed adjacent to the main parking area, replacing an old wooden one.

J. Michael Petry of Fairfield-based Petry Engineering, who prepared the site plan for the project, said his goal was to prepare a design that "improved safety and eliminated vehicular access conflicts," as well as reduce street and off-site parking on a regular basis.

The existing parking area at the northern end will be paved and reconfigured so that parking spaces are nearer to the main building. That would increase the number of parking spaces from 26 to 40.

Three generations of the Van Vleck family had resided in the mansion since it was constructed in 1916. Ownership of the property was transferred in 1993 from the descendants of Howard Van Vleck, the last member of the Van Vleck family to reside in the mansion, to the foundation, Jonne McCarron, the foundation's executive director has said.

The foundation has turned the Van Vleck house into a center for nonprofits, several of which are based on the second floor. The mansion's first floor provides space for fundraisers and meetings.

For the Perdues, they believe the project is important in honoring Van Vleck's wishes.

They often look out over their fence, and recall their old friend.

"He used to eat lunch on the terrace at the rear of the house," Bob Perdue said.

"His glass table is still there."

BY TANYA DROBNES OF THE MONTCLAIR TIMES