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## Once dubious, Wilder residents now wildly enthusiastic about preschool

By Sora O'Doherty



Photo Sora O'Doherty

When somewhat over one year ago it was proposed to rent a portion of the Art & Garden Center at Wilder to a Montessori preschool, Wilder residents expressed concerns that this was another burden for Orinda that would be a burden on the Wilder community. During an annual review by the Orinda planning commission on July 27, there was no word of opposition, only extremely happy Wilder residents saying that the applicant, Jatinder Kaur of Montessori Impressions Academy has changed their lives for the better.

The preschool was approved in 2020 to operate in Studio 4 at the Art & Garden Center at Wilder, offering preschool education and daycare for 30 children, aged 2 to 6, Mondays through Fridays, year round, from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. The school was authorized to also use the public bathroom and the children's playground. The applicant is required to pack up everything every day, so that the facility is available for other uses in the evenings and on the weekends.

The applicant came before the planning commission at the first annual review to ask that the use permit for the school at 20 Orinda Fields (the Art & Garden Center) be approved permanently and that the requirement for annual reviews be dropped. In addition, Kaur sought to open an annex at The Ranch House, 10 Orinda Fields, to accommodate another 10 children. Both properties are owned by the city of Orinda and rented out.

Senior Planner Adam Foster presented the matter to the planning commission, along with Director of Planning Drummond Buckley. Given that the previous hearing on approval of the use permit for the Montessori school had met with considerable concern from Wilder residents, commissioner Brandyn Iverson asked if the city had received any opposition to the current application. Foster stated that they had not, and in fact had only received statements of support.

Buckley added that Parks and Recreation Director Todd Trimble had not received any complaints during the time that the preschool has been operative. There has been no difficulty with students being dropped off and picked up at Wilder Fields. There was a single complaint about a parent parking by the mail kiosks and walking a student to the school, but it turned out to be a one-off incident and the complaint was withdrawn, with the complainant noting that the school had been very responsive and a very good neighbor. Staff also reported that there has thus far been no conflict with users of the Art & Garden Center or the playfields, although it was noted that the school has thus far been operating during a pandemic year and demand for the facilities has not been high.

Kaur stated that she brought the application because the school has been tremendously successful and that she has a waiting list for placement up to two years out and that places at the school are in high demand.

Although there was no opposition to the application, speaker after speaker gave the school glowing reviews. Wilder resident Karen Do said, "My 3-year-old daughter has been a student for eight months, and she has blossomed." Do said she was excited to find quality daycare right in her neighborhood and testified that Montessori Impressions provides education that contributes to kind next generation members of our community. Before her daughter was a student, she enjoyed co-sharing the play space, a question that had been raised by commissioner Iverson. Other parents echoed this sentiment, stating that they had used the playground before their children were enrolled and found the experience of interacting with the school children and teachers to be very beneficial.

All of the speakers were Wilder residents. Nisha Taparia called the school "a real blessing." Another speaker said, "I cannot tell you how excited we are to find quality childcare right in our neighborhood."

She added that the school provided a sense of community and togetherness, and that her family has gotten to know many others. Yet another speaker praised the school as "high quality early childhood education," and deemed it a "life-saver and a source of happiness our children have needed during this difficult time."

Vivian Wei is a Wilder resident, a corporate executive in a Fortune 500 company, a book author and blogs about women in the workforce. She said she was "incredibly excited that my child is starting at MIA." Wei also talked about how millions of women dropped out of the labor force during the COVID-19 pandemic because they had to stay home with their children. "I'm hanging in because of MIA and the schools in Orinda," she concluded. Other speakers told the commission about their very positive experiences with the school and how happy they were to find childcare in Wilder.

Commissioner Hubner asked how the school would be monitored if the annual review were dropped. Buckley said, "We have use permits for other things and they don't have annual review requirement." He explained that if an applicant is out of compliance with a use permit, the city can use code enforcement, and could ultimately revoke a use permit for noncompliance. In addition, he pointed out, because the city owns the properties, it bears added responsibility as the landlord. The director of parks and rec has an obligation to operate facilities in a manner consistent with the neighborhood and residents of Orinda.

Foster pointed out that it isn't a one-year lease but a 6-month rental agreement. The applicant added that they have been responsible renters and have provided a steady stream of revenue to the city, while the facilities remain available for public use in the evenings and on weekends. The matter passed unanimously.

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