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SCOTT FRANCE, AICP
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

March 13, 2025

Ms. Jayne Musonye
Director of Planning and Development
Municipality of Norristown
235 East Airy Street
Norristown, PA 19401-5048

Re: MCPC #22-0145-003
Plan Name: Elmwood Park Zoo - Master Plan Conditional Use
(2 lots comprising 72.6965 acres)
Situate: Sterigere Street (N)/Stanbridge Street (E)
Municipality of Norristown

Dear Ms. Musonye:

We have reviewed the above-referenced conditional use application as you requested on February 11, 2025. We forward this letter as a report of our review.

BACKGROUND

The applicant, Norristown Zoological Society, Inc., has requested a conditional use review in preparation for adoption of the Elmwood Park Zoo Master Plan, which is located within the municipality's RE Recreation District. This submittal, dated March 22, 2024, is an update to the sketch plan of the master plan dated May 12, 2022 that had been reviewed by Montgomery County in a letter dated July 14, 2022. Since that time, the welcome center and veterinary center that were identified for Phase I of the master plan have been constructed.

The revised master plan identifies three phases for site development, as well as an area labeled "Remaining Phases TBD". The zoning data table provided on the revised master plan indicates an overall increase of 14.5 acres impervious surface from the existing amount, which is 8.8 acres more than was proposed on the draft master plan. This will increase the site's impervious coverage from 16.6% (existing) to 36.34%.

Phase 2 will expand the zoo to property owned by the Municipality of Norristown on the west bank of Stony Creek via a new bridge that would accommodate pedestrians and emergency vehicles. Per the exhibit to the applicant's conditional use application, Phase 2 will include new wildlife exhibits, a nature play area, a restaurant, an educational facility, a maintenance and service area, vehicular and pedestrian paths, and surface-level parking. Phase 3 and future phases will add new wildlife exhibits, site modifications to address flooding concerns in accessible areas, and additional parking.

The zoning data table on the master plan identifies two parking scenarios, a surface lot option and a structured parking option. The conditional use application exhibit states that a parking structure will be introduced as part of Phase 2. The revised master plan identifies that this structure is proposed to be constructed over the existing surface lot adjacent to the welcome center.

As noted on the plan, the structured parking option would add approximately 447 spaces, including 8 ADA-accessible spaces, over what currently exists, which would total approximately 950 spaces on the site, including 20 ADA-accessible spaces and 8 spaces for buses. There is no change from what was proposed on the master plan sketch plan.

The surface parking option proposes an additional 338 spaces over what currently existed prior to Phase I , some of which would be located on the Wierman Fields and therefore subject to the terms of a court order and memorandum of understanding among Montgomery County, the Municipality of Norristown, and the applicant. This is addressed further in the Review Comments section of this letter titled “Deed Restriction”. This plan identifies 63 more surface parking spaces than the master plan sketch plan.

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN COMPLIANCE

We find the proposal to be generally consistent with the planning goals and objectives identified for recreational facilities in the Norristown Comprehensive Plan (2009). The proposal also supports the goals of *Montco 2040: A Shared Vision,* specifically, the goals of encouraging development and transformative investment where infrastructure already exists and supporting community destinations.

RECOMMENDATION

The Montgomery County Planning Commission (MCPC) generally supports the applicant‘s proposal, however, in the course of our review we have identified the following issues that the applicant and Municipality may wish to consider prior to final plan approval. Our comments are as follows:

REVIEW COMMENTS

FINAL PLAN REVIEW

The exhibit to the conditional use application states that Elmwood Park Zoo “intends to pursue preliminary development of the overall project, and then, when ready, seek final land development approval for each of the individual phases”. Section 282-306 of Norristown’s Subdivision and Land Use Development Ordinance (SALDO), Final Plan Submission Requirements, does not require a final plan review by Montgomery County. However, the Master Plan ordinance within the Zoning Code, Section 320-270.D(1) states, “Each phase of the Master Plan shall require land development approval in accordance with Chapter **282**, Subdivision and Land Development Ordinance”, and therefore we assume that each phase will be submitted for review to the county under Act 247 as a land development. Additionally, recognizing that significant changes may occur to the preliminary plan over time in response to changes required in order to comply with permitting requirements, we suggest that the Municipality submit the final plans to Montgomery County for review prior to final plan adoption.

COORDINATION WITH SEPTA BUS ROUTE 90

The revised master plan shows an access road connecting directly to Sterigere Street as part of the Phase 2 improvements. We highly recommend that the applicant coordinates with SEPTA to identify whether this connection represents a potential stop for the Route 90 bus that passes through this area on Sterigere Street.

PARCEL ID REFERENCES

The conditional use application references that this proposal pertains to three lots, however, Parcel Identification Number (PIN) 13-00-35901-00-5 refers to property that is owned by the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. It is the county's understanding that this parcel is not part of the Zoo's expansion project. We ask the applicant to confirm whether this parcel reference is accurate, and if it does not pertain to Elmwood Park Zoo, to remove it from the plans and future applications.

DEED RESTRICTION

The Municipality of Norristown was awarded state and county grants to fund the acquisition and preservation of a portion of parcel 13-00-15532-00-7 to be developed into softball fields, ultimately named the Wierman Fields. As a requirement of accepting the grant, the Municipality deed restricted the area that was acquired with grant funds (see Attachment 3) in a document that was recorded with the Montgomery County Recorder of Deeds in Deed Book 5760, Pages 929 to 935 on March 5, 2010.

In December 2018, the county reviewed a plan that proposed three phases of parking lot-related improvements within the deed-restricted area. The deed-restricted areas were identified as "Easement Area to be Vacated" on the plan shown in Attachment 3.

To reconcile the benefits of expanding the Zoo's parking area and the subsequent loss of open space, Montgomery County, the Municipality of Norristown, and Elmwood Park Zoo filed a Petition to Lift Declaration Covenants and Deed Restrictions on Tax Parcel Number 13-00-15532-00-7 in Montgomery County Orphans Court. Court order 2019-x0796, issued June 5, 2019, requires the deed restriction to be lifted for the entire area shown in Attachment 3. This ruling enabled Elmwood Park Zoo to construct the parking lots proposed within the wooded area west of Harding Boulevard, provided that a similar-sized area be deed-restricted.

The court order also stipulated that, "As set forth in the MOU, upon completion of the parking lot on the current location of the softball fields, the Zoo agreed to reimburse the County the sum of the original improvement grant, namely $960,323." The order further stated that the $960,323 must be held by Montgomery County for use towards open space/recreation projects within Norristown. It should be noted that this payment has not yet been made.

Attachment 4 identifies the area agreed upon by all parties to be preserved as deed-restricted open space to replace the wooded area that had been redeveloped as Phase 1 of the parking expansion in 2019. To date, the Phase 1 parking lots have been constructed, but the area identified in Attachment 4 has not been deed-restricted. The county will provide Norristown with a draft of the document(s) that will remove the existing deed restriction where it currently exists on Tax Parcel Number 13-00-15532-00-7 and that will deed restrict the area on Tax Parcel Numbers 13-00-35892-00-5 and 13-00-15532-00-7 (on the south end of the parcel). The county will also prepare a draft trail easement agreement for the deed-restricted area to be executed by the Municipality of Norristown and Montgomery County.

CONCLUSION

We wish to reiterate that MCPC supports the applicant's proposal, but we believe that our suggested revisions will better achieve Norristown's objectives redevelopment.

Please note that the review comments and recommendations contained within are advisory to the municipality and final disposition for the approval of any proposal will be made by the municipality.

Should the governing body approve a final plat of this proposal, the applicant must present the plan to our office for seal and signature prior to recording with the Recorder of Deeds office. A paper copy bearing the municipal seal and signature of approval must be supplied for our files. Please print the assigned MCPC number #22-0145-003 on any plans submitted for final recording.

Sincerely,

Donna Fabry, CFM, Principal Open Space Planner
dfabry@montcopa.org – 610-278-3445

c: Applicant's Representative
Chair, Municipal Planning Commission

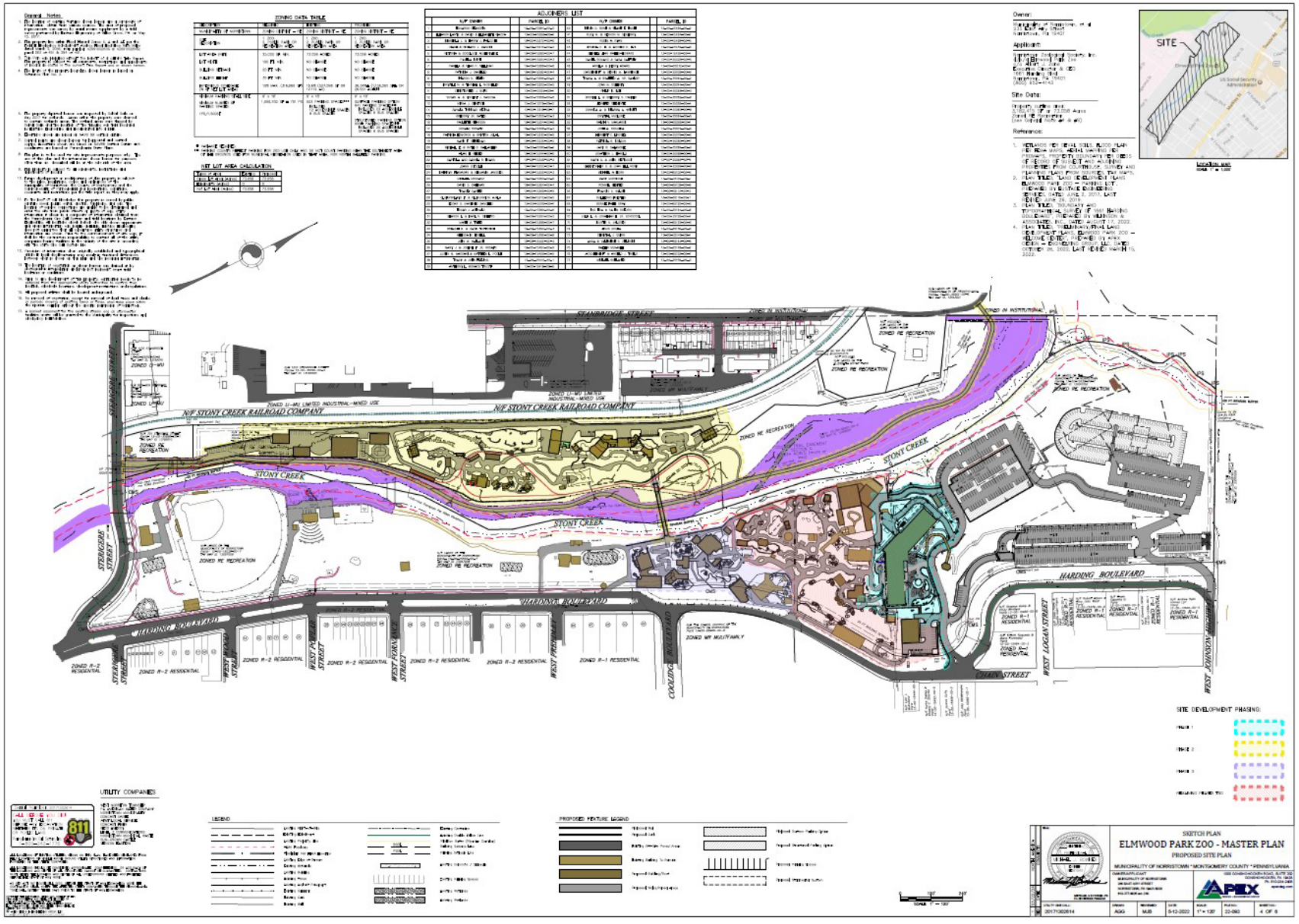
Attachment A: Aerial Image of Site
Attachment B: Reduced Copy of Applicant's Proposed Site Plan
Attachment C: Exhibit to Wierman Fields Deed Restriction
Attachment D: Plan of Area to be Deed Restricted and assigned as Trail Easement to Montgomery County

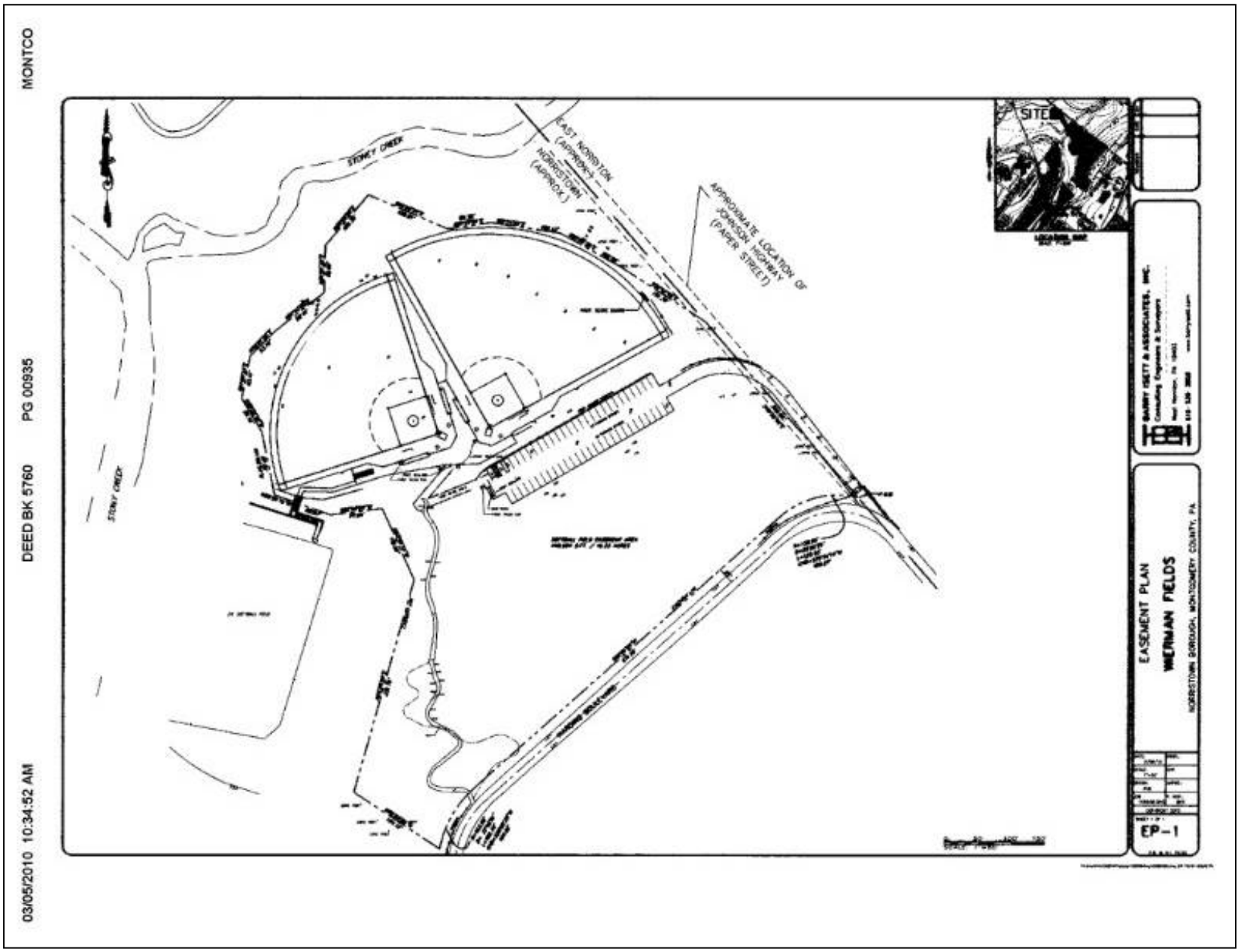
ATTACHMENTS

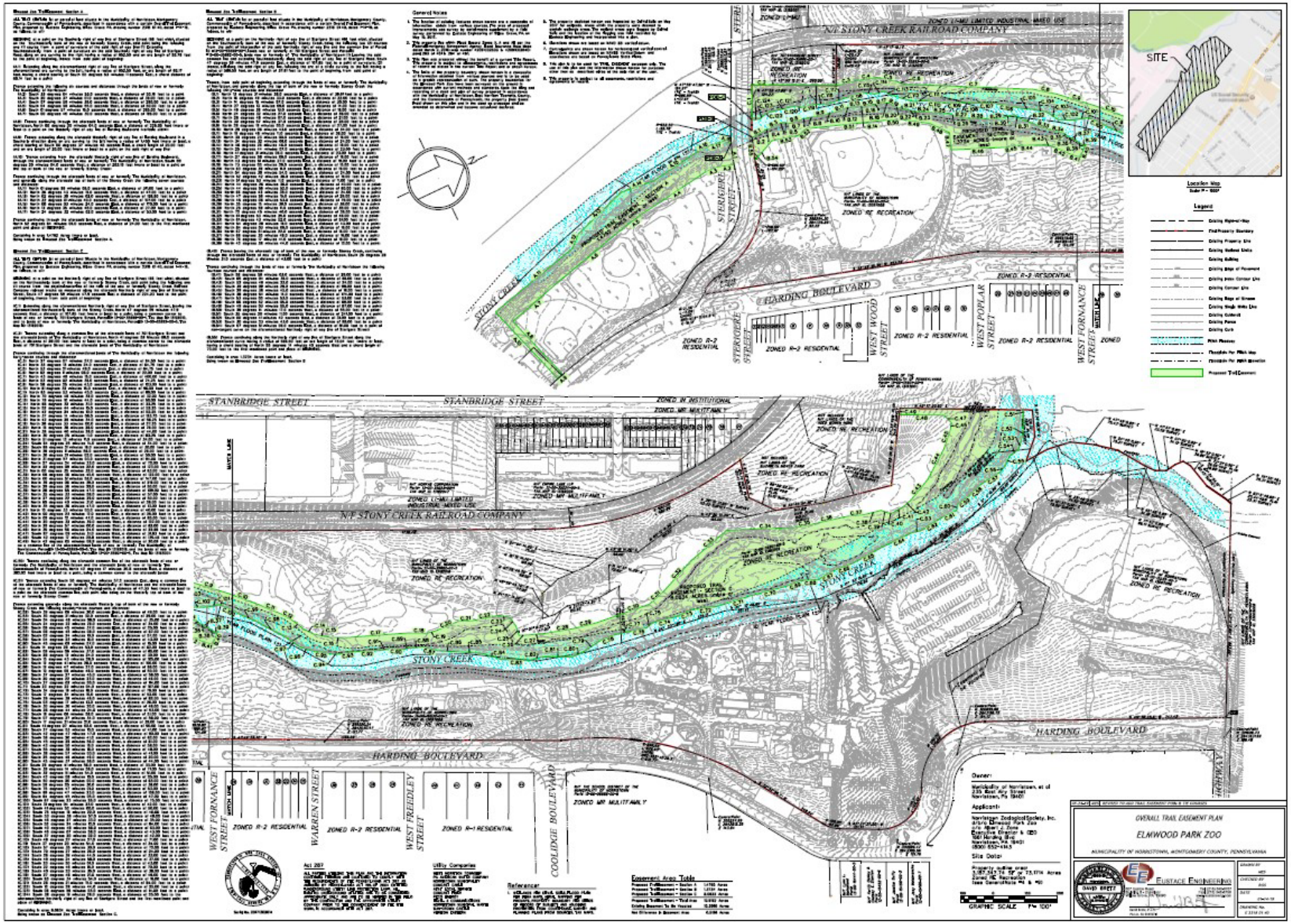


Elmwood Zoo CU
MCPC#220145003

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Aerial photography provided by Nearmap


ELMWOOD PARK ZOO - MASTER PLAN
PROPOSED SITE PLAN
MUNICIPALITY OF NORRISTOWN * MONTGOMERY COUNTY * PENNSYLVANIA
SITE
STONY CREEK
HARDING BOULEVARD
STANBRIDGE STREET
CHAIN STREET
WEST LOGAN STREET
WEST JOHNSON HIGHWAY
N/F STONY CREEK RAILROAD COMPANY
SITE DEVELOPMENT PHASING:
UTILITY COMPANIES
LEGEND
PROPOSED FEATURE LEGEND


MONTCO
DEED BK 5760 PG 00935
03/05/2010 10:34:52 AM
STONY CREEK
EAST NORRITON (APPROX.)
NORRISTOWN (APPROX.)
APPROXIMATE LOCATION OF JOHNSON HIGHWAY (PAPER STREET)
SITE
EASEMENT PLAN
WEIRMAN FIELDS
NORRISTOWN BOROUGH, MONTGOMERY COUNTY, PA.
EP-1


N/F STONY CREEK RAILROAD COMPANY
ZONED LI-MU LIMITED INDUSTRIAL MIXED USE
ZONED RE RECREATION
ZONED R-2 RESIDENTIAL
ZONED MF MULTIFAMILY
ZONED R-1 RESIDENTIAL
HARDING BOULEVARD
STANBRIDGE STREET
STERIGERE STREET
WEST WOOD STREET
WEST POPLAR STREET
WEST FORNANCE STREET
WARREN STREET
WEST FREEDLEY STREET
COOLIDGE BOULEVARD
STONY CREEK
SITE
OVERALL TRAIL EASEMENT PLAN
ELMWOOD PARK ZOO
MUNICIPALITY OF NORRISTOWN, MONTGOMERY COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA
EUSTACE ENGINEERING