



# A star is born: Easton's Nurture Nature Center obtains parking variance for planetarium installation

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*Brian Myszowski / LehighValleyNews.Com*

The Nurture Nature Center in Easton is hosting three new exhibits addressing climate change and the environment through June.



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EASTON, Pa. — Easton's Nurture Nature Center is one step closer to the stars now that it has acquired a parking variance allowing for the installation of a new planetarium attraction.

Representatives for the educational center at 518 Northampton St. came before the city's Zoning Hearing Board on Monday to obtain a parking variance to fit a new immersive dome attraction to the property without sacrificing its community garden, which has become a signature part of programming.

While the board eventually granted the variance — a novel compromise in which the center will validate garage parking on an as-needed basis — the Nurture Nature team first had to prove a point about parking at its facility.

Project Manager at Barry Isett & Associates Robert Korp explained the basic premise of the upcoming immersive dome project, which would occupy part of the center's parking, pushing their community garden to the Pine Street lot, and ultimately leading to a net loss of nine parking spaces.

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“The plan is oriented with north at the top of the page, so Northampton Street is at the top of the page. And then in the middle of the page, you see Pine Street, so the gray shaded area that's indicated as renovated and expanded building, that's where the planetarium and immersive dome goes,” Korp said.

“And again, that takes over the complete balance of the lot. So there will be a structure from Northampton all the way down to Pine. And then across Pine is where the parking lot gets reconfigured to create areas that we have noted as an urban garden, and that replaces and expands the garden function that's currently on the south end of the main lot.”

Zoning regulations call for one parking spot for every 500 square feet of the Nurture Nature Center, in addition to one parking spot per four seats in the planetarium/immersive dome.

That would mean under normal circumstances, the center would require 47 spaces, Korp said, but according to the center's research, they would rarely, if ever, require that much space.

From November 16, 2023 through March 6, 2024, a security camera at the center's lot took hourly photographs, accumulating thousands of images showing the facility seldom utilized all their spaces. In fact, on days besides Wednesdays and Saturdays — when the Nurture Nature Center is open — significantly fewer people park in the lot, Korp said.

Nurture Nature founder and Executive Director Rachel Hogan Carr provided a brief history of the center, which came into being in 2007, growing out of the floods of 2004. After renovating a former VFW hall, the center opened to the public in 2011, “and in the years ensuing, we have evolved into a full-blown center for learning about local and global environmental issues,” Carr said.

Over the years, Carr said, the facility has brought more and more older children for educational trips and activities, and when they caught wind of the latest immersive domes, they were interested in adding one to their center.

Carr said local school districts have signed on to help support the addition of an immersive dome thanks to its potential for a vast array of educational engagement.

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“So we're hoping that this would expand programming for the community, as well as for our school visitation. And by planetarium we're referring to something that now in the modern era is really an immersive dome theater,” Carr said.

“It can show full immersive programs on underwater science as well as planetary science. And they're quite impressive things now and would allow for some theater capability and neat opportunities beyond the old-school planetarium.”

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*“We're in a holding pattern, but this is a great step forward in the process,”*

Rachel Hogan Carr, Nurture Nature founder and executive director

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Carr said adding the new exhibit would allow the center “to accommodate more school visits, which thankfully will have a very limited parking impact, but also be able to lengthen and intensify the experience of the visitors who do come.”

To accommodate the immersive dome, the center would have to shift its “little free garden,” a community-supported green space that grows produce, to the Pine Street lot.

One option to reach the necessary number of spaces for the facility would be for the Nurture Nature Center to rent out 32 spots at a local garage, though it would be notably difficult for a nonprofit only open twice a week on average to afford that.

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Solicitor Robert Nitchkey offered a compromise: the Nurture Nature Center would essentially validate parking for the first 32 visitors who had to use a garage each day.

“So my point is rather than whatever it would have cost to rent 32 spaces for an entire month, you're talking about two days at \$128 a day, maximum,” Nitchkey said.

The board approved the plan, with that exception intended specifically for the Nurture Nature Center alone.

Carr — who said the board's decision was “a very good outcome” — confirmed she expects to hear from the Economic Development Administration, which the Nurture Nature Center is working with to procure funding for the immersive dome, within the next month,

“We're in a holding pattern, but this is a great step forward in the process,” Carr said.