

**EASTON**

# Easton zoning board rules on planetarium parking, College Hill apartments

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Jim Preston, attorney for developer BNE Real Estate Group, glances down as a point is made during a meeting of the Easton Zoning Hearing Board on Monday, March 18, 2024, in City Hall. The board denied the developer's request for a special exception to build 256 apartments at 300 Morrison Ave. on College Hill. Max Blease | [lehighvalleylive.com](https://lehighvalleylive.com) contributor



The Easton Zoning Hearing Board on Monday night heard the Nurture Nature Foundation's request for a parking variance and a special exception application from a developer looking to build 256 apartments.

The hearings started at 6 in the evening and ran until 10 at night.

Nurture Nature under its request for a variance would like to expand its 516-22 Northampton St. center to include a planetarium, which the owner described as a large domed theater that can show any science related footage — from undersea to interplanetary.

If the center expands, the number of required parking spaces would rise from 24 spaces to 48. Those extra spaces would need to be rented from a lot along Pine Street to the rear of the center, a burden for the nonprofit.

Because of the expansion of the facility, an outdoor green area used for environmental learning is proposed to be moved into the center's existing parking lot, further limiting parking.

The Nurture Nature Center has more parking spaces than they need, and showed security camera images that visitors rarely occupy more than 15 spaces. Many of the people who visit the Nurture Nature Center come to Easton and visit other attractions on the same day, so visitors tend to use other parking spaces, the nonprofit said.

The Easton Zoning Hearing Board recognized that Easton has a general need for more parking, but also acknowledged the value of the Nurture Nature Center. Their variance for parking was accepted.

In the apartment application, developer BNE Real Estate Group made its case represented by attorney Jim Preston. They proposed a special exception for a 256-apartment low-rise complex on 300 Morrison Ave. on College Hill, comprising 16 two-story buildings. Preston's witnesses included traffic engineer John Wichner of Bowman Consulting, Mark Bahnick of Van Cleef Engineering Associates and Nick Buckner of BNE Real Estate Group.

With each witness called on by Preston, neighbor Ralph Bellafatto stood to ask piercing questions mostly centered on traffic. An attorney whose family lives near the proposed apartments, Bellafatto scribbled notes onto a yellow legal pad while BNE made its initial arguments.

Wichner testified that based on his analysis of trip generation there would not be unexpected traffic congestion or dangers caused by the complex. Questioned by Bellafatto, Wichner testified that the intersection of Morrison Avenue and George Street could be safer if sight distances could be corrected and signage added.

Bellafatto brought his own traffic engineer to testify. Peter Terry, president of Benchmark Civil Engineering Services, was questioned by Bellafatto and the opposing counsel. This engineer said that while there would be ways to improve the intersection, it still would not be safe. The gradient of the roads could be corrected slightly but are too steep to have their issues fixed, according to the testimony. Later, residents complained that with snow and ice, the roads are too steep for cars to slow down without losing traction and sliding backwards.

Bellafatto and other residents repeatedly argued that the only entrance and exit are in front of a dangerous intersection. The swelling of congestion caused by the development would make it difficult for existing homeowners to safely leave their driveways, they argued.

Preston said in his closing argument thanked the community members for being civil and said, "It's obvious that the people that live immediately around this particular project do not want this project." He argued, however, Easton's development law is based on requirements, and not the complaints of the public.

The board asked the developers for an additional plan to make the intersection safer. The developers turned the board's request down.

The request for the apartments' special exception was denied by the board.

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