Albemarle County Planning Commission
Work Session and Regular Meeting
Final Minutes August 25, 2026

The Albemarle County Planning Commission held a public meeting on Tuesday, August 25, 2026, at 1:00 p.m.

Members attending were: Karen Firehock, Vice-Chair; Corey Clayborne; Nathan Moore; Lonnie Murray; Mary Katherine King; Catherine Brown.

Members absent: Luis Carrazana, Chair.

Other officials present were: Michael Barnes, Director of Planning; Bart Svoboda, Director of Community Development; Francis MacCall, Deputy Zoning Administrator; Jered Tate, Senior Planner; Ben Loppacker, Planner; Rebecca Ragsdale, Planning Manager; Jenny Tevendale, Deputy County Attorney; and Carolyn Shaffer, Clerk to the Planning Commissions.

Call to Order and Establish Quorum

Carolyn Shaffer called the roll.

Karen Firehock established a quorum.

Public Hearing

SP-2026-0001 Alberene Yoga Retreat Center

Ben Loppacker, Planner, said that he would give the staff presentation for the Alberene Yoga Retreat special use permit (SUP). He said that the property was located in southern Albemarle County along Secretary's Sand Road, approximately one mile south of the intersection of Secretary's Sand Road and Green Creek Road. He said that the surrounding area was of rural character with a variety of rural uses, including low-density single-family residential, forests and open space, and agricultural and forestal uses.

Mr. Loppacker said that the parcel was currently zoned Rural Areas (RA) and designated Rural Areas on the AC44 Comprehensive Plan. He said that while critical slopes and Water Protection Ordinance (WPO) buffers did exist on the site, the proposed development and structures associated with it would not impact either, and there would be no disturbance within critical slopes or Water Protection Ordinance buffers.

Mr. Loppacker said that shown before the Commission was the concept plan that was submitted by the applicant, including the proposed campsites, the retreat building, as well as some other amenities for people utilizing the boarding camp. The factors for consideration for special use permits were shown per the analysis included in the staff report. He said that staff found that the proposed boarding camp would cause no substantial detriment to adjacent parcels, would not change the character of the area,

would be in harmony with the purpose and intent of the chapter, and was consistent with the AC44 Comprehensive Plan.

Mr. Loppacker said that the request also included two special exceptions: one for grade for vehicle access aisles not adjacent to parking spaces, and the other being curb and gutter in parking areas along travel ways. He said staff had identified the following positive aspects of the request, which were the use was consistent with the review criteria for special use permits contained in the Zoning Ordinance. He said that a majority of the property would remain forested, and no detrimental impacts to adjoining properties were anticipated.

Mr. Loppacker said that staff was not able to identify any concerns at this time, and staff did not object to the special exceptions. He said that staff included conditions for the special use permit for consideration, which included limiting the amount of events per calendar year, establishing quiet hours, and preserving buffering between the use and the property boundaries.

Mr. Moore asked if the special exception applications were also going to be included with this item.

Mr. Loppacker said those would be acted on by the Board of Supervisors, and they were included in the presentation just for information.

Mr. Moore said he was curious about what it meant regarding the vehicle access aisles not being adjacent to parking spaces. He said he was wondering what the grading for vehicle access aisles might look like when they were used together.

Mr. Loppacker said that the vehicle access aisles not adjacent to parking spaces were limited to no more than a 10% grade without a special exception granted by the Board of Supervisors, which was what they were applying for.

Mr. Moore asked if these may be more than 10%.

Mr. Loppacker said yes, they would not be allowed to exceed 16%, but in some areas, it would be over 10%, which was what the proposal contained.

Mr. Murray asked if the road was paved.

Mr. Loppacker said yes, it was a paved public road maintained by Virginia Department of Transportation (VDOT).

Michael Barnes, Director of Planning, said that Secretary's Sand Road was paved all the way down to Route 6, and then Old Sand Road was unpaved.

Mr. Clayborne asked how they came up with the range for quiet hours.

Mr. Loppacker said that this range was consistent with the County's Noise Ordinance, as well as other boarding camps that had recently been approved within the County.

Ms. Firehock said that she did not realize the County had an ordinance that discussed quiet hours and had a set time for those.

Mr. Loppacker said that they limited the amplification of outdoor music during certain hours.

Ms. Firehock asked if the Planning Commission could determine that an earlier quiet hour was appropriate.

Mr. Loppacker said that was correct; it would just be a modification of the condition.

Ms. Firehock said that because of the agricultural uses in the Rural Area, people went to bed early, so it may be appropriate to have an earlier hour for that range.

Jenny Tevendale, Assistant County Attorney, said that the Commission would just need to be able to find that it was mitigating an impact of the special permit being requested.

Ms. Firehock asked if the applicant had a presentation.

Justin Shimp, Shimp Engineering, representing the Gates family, said that he would let the applicant come up and tell the Commission a little bit about their vision for the property and how they came to the site. He said that they had reviewed staff's proposed conditions, and they had no objection to those. He said that they would be happy to answer other questions related to changes in those at the end of this presentation.

Mr. Shimp provided a rendering of the building proposed. He said that it was essentially a slightly large house that could accompany these wellness-related events, including yoga and a variety of other wellness retreat options that worked well in these rural settings. He said that he did not think anyone would want to play loud music at an event like this.

Mr. Shimp said that the site was located on Secretary's Sand Road and primarily surrounded by forest land on their side of the road. He said that the driveway on the far right was an existing farm road that was cut in, and the reason they had the special exception was because that the road was about 13% or 14% at its steepest. He said that to meet the County requirement of 10%, they would have to tear out more trees, probably grade over critical slopes, and essentially cause more impacts than were necessary.

Mr. Shimp said that 16% was the common standard for a Rural Area driveway. He said that because they could not achieve the 10% without substantially more impact and detriment to the woodlands there, they applied for the exception. He said that the existing parcel had a couple of existing roads coming in. He said that they were potentially trying to use that infrastructure for the project. He said that coming in off Secretary's Sand, down

the hill, there was an easement; the applicant owned the adjacent property, but it was not part of this special use permit.

Mr. Shimp said that looking at the proposed layout, the two roads followed the existing infrastructure. He said that the structure sat on grade and had a basement walkout. He said that they had defined the camping areas, a picnic area, a labyrinth, and various nature areas in the space. He said that in phase one, they would have tent camping sites, and then in the future planned to develop some small cabin-type structures that would be for the folks who come to stay for the events.

Mr. Shimp said that they did not know the timing of the build-out of that, but they did want to start with the event building and then work their way up with camping for the project. He said the special exception regarding the curb and gutter was asking for there to be no concrete curb, gutter, and drainage; instead, they would have gravel to better suit the rural setting. He said that for the small amount of impervious area, they could manage the drainage without curb and gutter.

Mr. Shimp said that to illustrate the lack of visibility, he had provided another rendering of the site. He said that it showed more of the building than what was actually visible, but the grade picture at the top was useful as it demonstrated how far below the road the structure was and the depth of the trees. He said over 200 feet of trees between the structure area and the road were maintained with the plan.

Mr. Shimp said that there was the existing buffer by the stream and a proposed open space of 14.5 acres. He said that the entire back portion, essentially 50% of the property, would be untouched in the application.

Christopher Gates, owner of the property, said that he was an Army veteran and part of his work involved working with other veterans on healing, personal growth, meditation, and reconnecting with themselves. He said that this Yoga Retreat Center was an extension of that work, which meant a great deal to him and was work that he had dedicated the rest of his time on this planet to. He said that additionally, Charlottesville had been part of his family story for a long time. He said that he and his wife met here when he was a West Point cadet and she was a student here at University of Virginia (UVA).

Mr. Gates said that his wife's family had deep connections to the area for years and for many years were UVA season ticket holders. He said that their children grew up going to Saturday football games. He said that although he currently lived in northern Virginia, he loved Charlottesville. He said that they intended to permanently move here in the next few years, once their son completed high school. We said that they believed there was an under-served need for healing, coaching, meditation, yoga, and small intentional retreats.

Mr. Gates said that they found this property and fell in love with this part of Albemarle County: the forest, the quiet, the rural landscape, the view of Appleberry Mountain, and

the feeling they had when out there. He said that they did not intend or want to change that, and preserving that was fundamental to what they were trying to create. He said that there was also something about the history of the land that had become deeply symbolic to him. He said that one of the long-term neighbors down the road told him that the property had been timbered so many times that the land had really struggled to recover.

Mr. Gates said they even tried dropping fertilizer from the air to help the trees grow, but it was unsuccessful. He said that he thought that was one of the reasons that the property owners cut it up and decided to sell the property. He said that he could not help but see the parallel; some of the people who came to retreats like there may feel the same way: life was taking a lot out of them, and they may wonder whether they could still grow, change, or heal. He said that there was something symbolic to him in creating a place for those people on a piece of land that itself needed love, care, patience, and restoration.

Mr. Gates said that his intention was to care for both. He said that the majority of the property would remain forested, with roughly 14.5 acres designated as a conservation area. He said that they wanted to steward the land, not conquer it, because the rural beauty and quiet were what made that healing possible. He said that they also owned the adjacent lot and intended to keep it undeveloped except for their permanent home.

Mr. Gates said that ultimately, they hoped to create a place where people could slow down, reconnect with themselves and with nature, and leave it a little better than when they arrived. He said that over the years, he hoped to leave the land a little better than he found it.

Mr. Moore said they received a letter from a neighbor who was not opposed to the proposal but stated that he liked to shoot targets with fairly loud guns. He asked how that impacted their yoga classes at the retreat.

Mr. Gates said he thought the yoga classes would take place inside and did not think it is going to be an issue. He said that children would not be attending the retreats; they were for adults. He said that he did not think any of the concerns in the letter were going to be an issue with this project.

Mr. Murray said that Mr. Shimp had mentioned the steepness of the driveway, and he appreciated him trying to minimize disturbance on that. He said that, however, when there was a steep slope and a gravel driveway, it was prone to erosion. He asked what measures they planned to take to prevent erosion, given the steepness of the gravel driveway that was being proposed.

Mr. Shimp said that even though this was a rural type of use, it did still have a site plan component. He said that even though it was gravel, the County had essentially performed a drainage review of that, so they would typically put in cross pipes, ditches, and all that was required. He said that depending on the circumstances, there may be some pavement or consideration for surface treatment in the steepest portion, but that was

generally something they worked out with the County Engineer during the site plan review.

Mr. Clayborne asked if there would be open fires at the campsites.

Mr. Shimp said that he believed there was a note in the staff report regarding fires rules in this particular special use permit.

Mr. Loppacker said that there were supplementary regulations for outdoor fire pits, which would have to be met through approval by the Fire Department. He said that this would need to be part of the site plan, and the Fire Department would analyze whether the measures being taken met their standards.

Mr. Shimp said that this was an organized event space rather than a campsite for families. He said that if they did have a fire, it would likely be put on by the host, rather than the individual attendees. He said that they certainly had to follow County regulations.

Mr. Clayborne asked if there needed to be a condition regarding compliance with seasonal burn bans and droughts, or if that did not matter since this was not a traditional campground.

Mr. Loppacker said it was staff's opinion that it would be covered through compliance with the Fire Department when the site plan was submitted. He said that if there were any issues with that, the Fire Department would bring them up in their review.

Ms. Firehock asked if the applicant was envisioning people coming for the weekend to participate in various yoga activities, of if there were daily classes a few times a day. She said that she was trying to get a sense of the rhythm of visitation to the site and the number of people.

Mr. Gates said that initially, they would have day classes, and the reason for the camping component was so that they did not have to come back into town and can stay in the environment. He said that initially, after day classes, they would love to be able to host people overnight where they could come in and do morning yoga and have classes.

Ms. Firehock asked if they were successful, what sort of visitation they expected to be coming and going from the site.

Mr. Gates said that they were limited in the proposal to a maximum of 50 participants. He said he would be overjoyed if they had that many. He said they were not anticipating that the retreats would be that large at all. He said he preferred to work at a smaller number, but that was in accordance with VDOT and other requirements.

Ms. Firehock asked if it would just be yoga; there would be no other events.

Mr. Gates said that there would be no weddings and no birthday parties. He said that this was a space to reconnect with nature, to take classes, to do healing work, and just to get

better; it was a place where people could escape for a little. He said that people could enjoy the view, walk the labyrinth, and get time away from the busy schedules and lives that they wanted to provide.

Mr. Gates said that this had been beneficial to him as a veteran and to the people he had worked with. He said that they were just trying to bring more of that and have a space for them to do that. He said that right now in northern Virginia, he sent them right back out into the busy world when they were done with these things. He said that was not preferred; being able to have a space where they can enjoy the calm was what they were looking for and why they bought the property.

Ms. Firehock opened the public hearing. Seeing no speakers, she closed the public hearing.

Ms. Firehock motioned that the Planning Commission recommend approval of SP-2026-00001 Alberene Yoga Retreat with the conditions listed in the staff report. Mr. Clayborne seconded the motion, which carried unanimously (6-0). (Mr. Carrazana was absent)

Adjournment

At 9:20 p.m., the Commission adjourned to September 8, 2026, Albemarle County Planning Commission meeting, 6:00 p.m.



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Michael Barnes, Director of Planning

(Recorded by Carolyn S. Shaffer, Clerk to Planning Commission & Planning Boards; transcribed by Golden Transcription Services)

Approved by Planning Commission
Date: 09/08/2026
Initials: CSS