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Design Focused Engineering

Project Narrative For: **SP-2026-00001**

Parcel Description: **Tax Map 119, Parcel 52C2**

Pre-App Meeting Date: **November 17, 2025;** June 24, 2024 (Previous)

SUP Submission Date: **January 20, 2026**

Revision Date: **April 16, 2026**

TMP	ACREAGE	EXISTING ZONING	PROPOSED ZONING	COMP PLAN DESIGNATION
119-52C2	29.71	Rural Areas	SP for Boarding Camp	Rural Areas

Additional Zoning Considerations:

Critical Slopes, Natural Heritage Area, Southern Albermarle Rural Historic District

Location:

West side of Secretarys Sand Road approximately 1.2 mi from the intersection with Alberene Road.

Surrounding Uses:
Adjacent properties are also zoned Rural Areas. Many are largely forested and some include existing residential uses.

Project Proposal:

Christopher Lee Gates and Jamie Porter Gates (the "owners") are the owners of Albemarle County tax parcel 119-52C2, which is a 29.71 acre parcel located in the Samuel Miller District (the "property"). The owners seek a special use permit for a boarding camp on the property to establish a small-scale wellness retreat. The given location of this proposed use is ideal for a wellness retreat, allowing guests to experience rest and relaxation through nature-based activities such as hiking, sightseeing, stargazing, outdoor yoga, and camping, creating a harmonious use consistent with the county's Comprehensive Plan. Many of these retreat activities will be outside within the existing forested site. There will also be a building with a yoga studio for days when inclement weather does not permit outdoor recreation. In phase 1 of the retreat development, overnight accommodations will be in the form of tent camping sites. In phase 2, there will be cabins, domes, and/or yurts. At this time, a commercial kitchen is not proposed on the property and catering would be utilized to serve property guests. When not being utilized for yoga and spiritual retreats, the owners intend to rent out the event center and the cabins, domes, and/or yurts to create additional revenue for the property. Additional events include wellness and nature retreats and small family gatherings. All events, including yoga classes, will be limited to 50 people per day.

Site Improvements:

Travelways

There is an existing gravel driveway on the property that will serve the wellness retreat center and will be upgraded as necessary to serve as a fire access road. The owners also own "Lot 3," TMP 119-52C1, and

are considering development of a single-family residential structure on this parcel. There is an existing access easement on TMP 119-52C2, which would be updated as necessary in the future to serve the single-family residence.

Labyrinth and Picnic Area

In one of the flatter areas of the site, the applicants plan to build a labyrinth and picnic area that will be available for use by attendees of the retreat center. This area will be accessed via walking trails and/or the lower parking area. Labyrinth walking is an ancient practice used for active meditation, prayer, and spiritual centering. Unlike a maze, which is designed to confuse with dead ends and multiple choices, a labyrinth is unicursal—meaning it has a single, winding path that leads from the entrance directly to the center and back out again. This practice will support the mission of the retreat center, as a labyrinth is often viewed as a metaphor for the journey of life, a spiritual pilgrimage, or a journey to one's own center. Surrounding the labyrinth will be a picnic area, also available to attendees of the retreat center. As described in the concept plan, this area may include a pole barn type shelter, but the primary intention is to have a small cleared area with several picnic tables or similar seating arrangement.

These open areas will also be utilized by retreat center attendees for star gazing, another key practice for supporting meditation and wellness. The rural nature of the site is crucial to providing this restorative opportunity for visitors to enjoy.

Hiking trails through the existing forest will connect the open recreation areas to the rest of the site including the camping/cabin areas and the indoor building/yoga studio.

Camping/Cabin Areas

During the first phase of the project, there will be dispersed tent camping areas within the existing open and forested areas. During the second phase of the boarding camp, the applicants intend to develop several cabins, yurts, domes, or tent platforms. The exact nature of these structures will be determined during the site plan phase. There will be no more than nine structures of up to 1,000 square feet each. At this time, it is likely that there would be one central bathhouse to serve multiple units. Individual well and septic connections may be considered during the site plan stage if necessary.

Building: Yoga Studio/Indoor Space for Retreat Center

The applicants expect the main indoor building for the retreat center to be a two-story building, with a walk-out basement. The footprint is anticipated to be no larger than 4,000 square feet, as listed in the concept plan. The main portion of the building will be an open floor yoga studio on the first floor, which opens onto an outdoor porch. Yoga classes will take place outside on the porch as weather allows. In addition, the building will include office area, storage space, a small kitchen, bathrooms, a loft, and deck. Two parking areas are proposed – one at the upper level of the building, and one at the lower level of the building. There will be a walkway and stairs connecting the parking to each level. The basement level of the building will only have storage, and will not need to be accessed by event attendees. Accessible parking will be located in the upper parking lot. This building will be served by onsite well and septic.

The main intent of the wellness retreat center is to provide an opportunity for attendees to be immersed in nature, even while indoors. Therefore, it is crucial that the building be situated within the existing forested topography, with convenient access to the rest of the site for outdoor recreation.

Zoning Analysis:

The following analysis is provided pursuant to Sec. 33.8 of the Albemarle County Zoning Ordinance, which sets forth factors to be considered when evaluating a special use permit request:

Public Need or Benefit

The Wellness Retreat Center will provide significant public benefit to the surrounding area. There are only a few other similar centers within Albemarle County, so adding a center will be a useful addition. Hiking, camping, “forest bathing,” star-gazing, meditation and yoga are well documented to reduce stress and anxiety, and the setting of the site will help people to connect with the natural environment and support the character of the rural areas. In particular, the labyrinth on site will allow attendees to let go of "left-brain" logical thought and focus on introspection and presence. Overall, the center aims to support the health and wellbeing of the community.

No Substantial Detriment

The proposed wellness retreat center will not be a substantial detriment to adjacent properties. The property’s large size significantly helps to reduce impacts to neighboring properties. The applicants propose minimal tree clearing on the property, and propose to concentrate clearing around site improvements - this will enable substantial tree cover to remain intact along the property’s borders, maintaining buffers between the property and neighboring parcels. The applicants seek to be a good neighbor and the areas proposed for new structures were selected to minimize visual impacts to adjacent properties. In addition, the applicants propose to abide by amplified sound limitations that are applicable to wineries and breweries in the Rural Areas (Sec. 18-5.1.25(e)). The applicants propose minimal site lighting, and only proposes lighting that is required for security, accessibility, and building code compliance purposes.

Character of the nearby area is Unchanged

The area surrounding the property is primarily characterized by forestry activity and forested residential properties. This proposal will not compromise the character of the area especially since the new structures proposed are predominantly concentrated toward the center of the property. Much of the property will remain forested.

The intent of the Rural Areas District is “preservation of agricultural and forestal lands and activities; water supply protection; limited-service delivery to the rural areas; and conservation of natural, scenic, and historic resources.” This proposal is consistent with the intent of the Rural Areas District as this proposal will not compromise future agricultural or forestal activities from taking place on the property. Due to the sloping nature of the site, the proposed buildings will likely not be visible from Secretarys Sand Road.

Harmonious Use

With the purpose and intent of the Zoning Ordinance

The proposed used is harmonious with the intent of the Zoning Ordinance. As described above, the proposal is consistent with the intent of the Rural Areas District to preserve agricultural and forestal lands.

The uses permitted by right in the zoning district

This use is harmonious with the by right uses permitted in the zoning district and will not prohibit future use of the property for by right purposes. Other uses permitted by right in the zoning district include single family dwellings, agriculture, forestry, homestays, veterinary services, farm winery uses, commercial stables, farm brewery uses, farmers’ markets, and religious assembly use. The proposed event center is very comparable in scale and impact to

these by-right uses, and will not prohibit future use of the property for these purposes.

The regulations provided in Section 5 of the zoning ordinance as applicable

The use will comply with the supplemental regulations for day camps and boarding camps included in Sec. 5.1.05 of the Albemarle County Zoning Ordinance.

The public health, safety, and general welfare

The proposed use will be harmonious with and not compromise public health, safety, and general welfare. Rather, the retreat center will provide multiple opportunities to benefit the public through educational class and events.

Consistency with the Comprehensive Plan

The AC44 Comprehensive Plan designates the property as part of the Rural Areas. The purpose of the Rural Areas is to promote the agricultural and forestry industry, preserve natural resources, protect historic and cultural resources, and maintain a distinct boundary with the Development Areas. Alberene Wellness Retreat directly aligns with the specific objectives listed in the Comprehensive Plan in the following ways:

Rural Areas

Objective 2: Protect natural systems, water supplies, and historic and cultural resources through the implementation of natural area preservation, adaptive reuse, historic preservation, and education policies and practices.

The project will preserve and incorporate the natural character of the site's existing wooded areas as an integral part of the project's purpose—providing a serene setting conducive to spiritual education, reflection, and meditation. This use promotes an appreciation for the natural environment and supports the County's vision for responsible environmental stewardship.

The applicant's proposal also aligns with this objective by concentrating most of the development along the portion of the property that faces the road, thereby minimizing disturbance to the broader landscape. New structures will be modest in scale and clustered together rather than dispersed throughout the site. This approach helps retain large areas of undisturbed woodland toward the rear of the property, where mature oak and pine trees create a valuable natural habitat.

Consistent with the Comprehensive Plan, which "prioritizes the conservation and restoration of the natural environment and ecosystems in the Rural Area," the proposed development demonstrates sensitivity to these ecological functions. Critical environmental features such as steep slopes, the stream, and the associated buffer zones will remain undisturbed, ensuring that the site's natural systems continue to function effectively and contribute to the County's environmental health and scenic quality. The activities that will occur at the proposed use will not infringe on the community's priorities of "protecting waterways and dark skies" as these activities rely on maintaining the health and preservation of the nearby natural resources.

Objective 3: Increase the use of land conservation programs to implement the Objectives of AC44's Rural Area Chapter and Environmental Stewardship Chapter.

The northwestern portion of the site (approximately 14.5 acres out of 29.71) will be maintained as an existing wooded buffer. The applicants will work with the county to determine an appropriate conservation program to align with the counties goals of environmental stewardship in this area.

Objective 6: Encourage land uses that support large and unfragmented rural properties while mitigating their potential impacts.

6.1 Add small-scale, outdoor recreation uses (not to include indoor lodging) that have minimal impact on natural resources, infrastructure, and adjacent properties to the list of uses permitted in the Rural Area Zoning District, especially where these uses can co-exist with rather than replace existing agricultural and silvicultural uses.

The proposed use of this site will facilitate multiple activities that fall under outdoor recreation use. The site will prioritize small scale, outdoor spiritual retreats focused on nature-based activities including star gazing, hiking trails, picnic areas, yoga, and camping. The picnic area will include an outdoor labyrinth, constructed with either plants, wood, or stone. There will also be an indoor yoga studio integrated into the forest, which allows for participants to immersed in nature during all weather.

The proposed development maintains the integrity of the surrounding rural landscape. Due to the natural grade of the property, which slopes downward from Secretarys Sand Road toward a creek, the planned site improvements will be largely concealed from public view. This topographic condition ensures that new structures and associated activities will not intrude upon or detract from the existing scenic vistas along this rural corridor.

By situating the improvements below the road elevation and limiting their visual prominence, the proposal helps preserve the sense of openness, natural character, and historic context that define the area. This sensitive approach to siting reinforces the County's goal of maintaining the authenticity of its rural and historic landscapes, allowing visitors and residents alike to continue experiencing the corridor's unspoiled and historically resonant character.

Environmental Stewardship

Objective 4: Protect and restore critical habitats for biodiversity and ecosystem health – including a network of large and well-connected native habitat blocks, priority areas identified in the Biodiversity Action Plan, the Mountain Protection Areas, forested habitat corridors, and riparian buffers – and protect and improve dark-sky conditions.

This wellness retreat center will have a low-impact on the surrounding ecosystems and will be committed to the restoration and maintenance of land stewardship. Habitat blocks, forested corridors, and riparian buffers will be protected within the existing deciduous and evergreen forest areas of the site.

Impact on Traffic:

Alberene Wellness Retreat's traffic impacts will be limited to attendees of the wellness retreat center or the cabin rentals in phase two. When there is a retreat occurring, attendees could use the cabins for overnight accommodations, and as such there would not be additional traffic for separate cabin rentals during a yoga retreat. Additionally, either during a retreat or cabin rentals, the owners may use the entrance to access their anticipated residence on "Lot 3" TMP 119-52C1. Total traffic at any point in time would be captured by either Table A OR Table B, not both at once. Maximum attendance at the retreat center is anticipated to be 20 clients per day. Total traffic for this scenario is reflected in Table A. The

maximum number of rental cabins would be nine units. Total traffic for this scenario is reflected in Table B below.

Table A. Retreat Center Anticipated Traffic Impacts

	Trips In	Trips Out	Total Daily Trips
Retreat Center (Estimated per Anticipated Attendees)	50	50	100
Single Family Detached Residence (Estimated per ITE Trip Generation Manual 12th Edition)	5	4	9
Total			109

Table B. Cabin Rental Anticipated Traffic Impacts

	Trips In	Trips Out	Total Daily Trips
Recreational Home: 9 Units (Estimated per ITE Trip Generation Manual 12th Edition)	20	20	40
Single Family Detached Residence (Estimated per ITE Trip Generation Manual 12th Edition)	5	4	9
Total			49

The owners of parcel 119-52C2 have two divisions rights, which means they could develop two single family residential units on this land, as well as one single family residence on TMP 119-52C1. Each of these by-right residential units could also have a home occupation with up to ten trips per day. This potential by-right traffic impact is shown in Table C. The total amount of trips (57) is comparable to the anticipated cabin rental traffic (49). If the special use permit is approved, the owners commit to not building a second residence on TMP 119-52C2, thereby limiting traffic from what is could by by-right.

Table C. By-Right Traffic Comparison

	Trips In	Trips Out	Total Daily Trips
Single Family Detached Residence (Estimated per ITE Trip Generation Manual 12th Edition):	5*3 = 15	4*3 = 12	27

Three Units			
Home Occupation: Three Units	5*3 = 15	5*3 = 15	30
Total			57

Impact on Environmental Features:

This proposal will have limited impact environmental features as critical slopes; the stream and affiliated buffer areas will remain undisturbed. There will be minimal exterior lighting and any on-site lighting proposed, which will be limited to lighting for safety and security, will be compliant with Albemarle County regulations and will not compromise the dark sky as a scenic and natural resource in Albemarle County. Per preliminary research, much of the existing soils in this area are loam which indicates there will be adequate percolation rates to support drain fields on this site. On site well and septic will be placed in adequate locations to support safe installation and long-term maintenance. The areas of the site outside of proposed structures and travelways will remain forested and undisturbed.

Impact on Public Safety:

The property is located within Albemarle County Fire Rescue District 4, the North Garden Volunteer Fire Company. All site improvements will comply with all fire apparatus access requirements, and the site would be reached through these established routes in case of an emergency.

The proposed building with the yoga studio will not require fire flow for a sprinkler system. It will be Type V construction, and will remain below the applicable requirements for a sprinkler system.[1] In case of an emergency, water can be supplied from the existing dry hydrant in between Esmont Farm and Esmont Road (approximately three miles from the site).

Public facilities required to support the establishment and maintenance of the boarding camp are anticipated to be minimal. The camp does not plan to use public water nor sewer as all water and sewer infrastructure will be served by on-site well and septic systems. The applicant plans to only add minimal lighting to the property, within existing County guidelines. They will abide by a Dark Sky commitment and encourage Albemarle County to become a Dark Sky community. Lighting may be provided along the access road in order to provide safety lighting in case of an emergency.

Impact on Public School Facilities:

There is no impact anticipated on public school facilities.

Conclusion

In summary, this special use permit request for a boarding camp on 119-52C2 in the rural areas will be harmonious with the existing adjacent uses, and will have limited impact on traffic and environmental

[1] Per International Building Code Sections 903.2.1.3 and 506.2: maximum 12,000 square feet gross floor area and 300-person capacity. As currently proposed, the combined area of all floors is less than 7,000 square feet total (less than 3,000 footprint per floor), and the allowable occupancy would be no more than 85 people.

features. The retreats and rentals will provide spiritual and health benefits for community members in an appropriate forested setting.