



CITY OF HARRISONBURG COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

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October 5, 2026

**TO THE MEMBERS OF CITY COUNCIL
CITY OF HARRISONBURG, VIRGINIA**

SUBJECT:

Consider a request from Eastern Mennonite School to approve the required number of off-street parking spaces

Consider a request from Eastern Mennonite School to amend the master plan at 701 and 801 Parkwood Drive and 1251 Virginia Avenue

**EXTRACT FROM THE DRAFT MINUTES OF HARRISONBURG PLANNING
COMMISSION MEETING HELD ON: September 9, 2026**

Chair Baugh read the requests and asked staff to review.

Ms. Rupkey said Eastern Mennonite School (EMS) is requesting approval of the proposed number of minimum off-street parking spaces relating to school uses and to amend the master plan for a +/- 26.3-acre property zoned R-3/I-1 and B-2/I-1. The property is addressed as 701 and 801 Parkwood Drive and 1251 Virginia Avenue and is identified as tax map parcel 47-N-7.

EMS's first I-1, Institutional Overlay District (I-1) Master Plan was approved in September 2002. The master plan provided for the planned development of the campus, including building expansions, parking areas, and athletic fields. It also approved limited relief from zoning requirements for a baseball dugout along Mount Clinton Pike that encroached five feet into the required 30-foot setback and for required parking separation along the western property line adjoining Eastern Mennonite University.

In 2016, EMS, Virginia Mennonite Missions, and Mennomedia, Inc. requested an amendment to the 2002 Master Plan and an expansion of the I-1 overlay to include three additional parcels totaling +/- 2.08 acres. The amendment supported conversion of the former Mennomedia office building at 1251 Virginia Avenue to the elementary school and established a campus with zero-foot setbacks from internal property lines and a 10-foot perimeter building setback. In 2019, a plat

was recorded to vacate the internal property lines and dedicate public right-of-way along Parkwood Road creating the lot as it is today.

Land Use

The Comprehensive Plan designates this site as Institutional and Limited Commercial and states:

Institutional

These areas are planned for development by certain institutional uses, like private colleges and universities, hospitals, and retirement communities that operate on large land areas and may function in a campus-like environment.

Limited Commercial

These areas are suitable for commercial and professional office development but in a less intensive approach than the Commercial designation. These areas need careful controls to ensure compatibility with adjacent land uses. The maintenance of functional and aesthetic integrity should be emphasized in review of applications for development and redevelopment and should address such matters as: control of access; landscaping and buffering; parking; setback; signage; and building mass, height, and orientation. It is important that development within Limited Commercial areas does not incrementally increase in intensity to become similar to the Commercial designation. Efforts should be made to maintain the intent as described above.

Updated 2026 Master Plan Narrative and Map

If approved, the proposed 2026 Master Plan will supersede the previously approved EMS Master Plan to reflect the current single-parcel campus and to allow additional campus buildings, site improvements, and parking modifications, which are described in the master plan narrative and illustrated in the map.

The proposed plan maintains the minimum 10-foot setback along the exterior campus boundary that was established through the 2016 Master Plan amendment. This flexibility is intended to accommodate the existing dugout and the proposed athletic concessions building.

Minimum Off-Street Parking Requirements

EMS is requesting an expansion in parking areas for the EMS campus. Zoning Ordinance Section 10-3-25 (12) specifies the minimum off-street parking requirements for “Elementary schools, junior or senior high schools, or equivalent facilities” and states:

Proposed off-street parking spaces shall be programmed by the applicable school authorities as necessary to meet state standards for use and consideration of site locations, then submitted to the planning commission for comprehensive site plan review.

The applicant used the Virginia Department of Education's Guidelines for School Facilities in Virginia's Public Schools (2021) to calculate the needs of the EMS campus. These guidelines recommend enough parking for staff, an additional 10 to 20 percent of spaces for visitors, and student parking equal to one-third of enrollment. Based on Virginia Department of Education guidance and using a 10 percent visitor rate, the applicant calculates a need for 200 spaces for staff, visitors, and students. The applicant is requesting Planning Commission's approval that the minimum number off-street parking spaces for school uses for this site be set at 200.

Master Plan Parking, Landscaping, and Access

In addition to the parking required for school uses, EMS proposes 235 additional spaces to accommodate recurring church services, athletic events, and special events. The master plan proposes a maximum of 435 off-street parking spaces campus-wide, including the minimum 200 spaces required for school uses.

The proposed parking lot landscaping modification would allow required landscaping islands to be located either within a parking lot or within 15 feet of the parking lot. This approach would still require parking lot landscaping within the campus while providing flexibility for the proposed parking configuration and drive aisle patterns. At this time the parking lots are not in final design, thus the applicant would like to keep the flexibility for the whole site to have the option to deviate from ZO Sections 10-3-30.1 (5) and (6) of the Zoning Ordinance and has indicated that all parking areas have the ability to deviate from the landscaping requirement and may be provide landscaping within 15-feet of the parking lot if Sections 10-3-30.1 (5) and (6) in the areas shown on the Master Plan Map.

The applicant is additionally requesting to deviate from ZO Section 10-3-25 (4) a. The deviation would allow a reduction in the required five-foot separation between nonresidential parking and adjoining residential property and allow the parking area to exceed 50 percent of the area between the building setback and public street frontage.

The 2026 Master Plan narrative also identifies existing and future access agreements with adjacent properties. The master plan narrative identifies an existing private access easement serving Virginia Mennonite Missions/Anabaptist Mission Partners (VMM/AMP) from Virginia Avenue to their property, proposes that EMS obtain an easement to address an existing access encroachment onto the VMM/AMP property, and provides a location for a future access easement to Parkwood Drive from 1194 Park Road and/or a shared-parking agreement with Eastern Mennonite University upon EMU's request.

Master Plan Open Space

The 2026 Master Plan Map identifies reserved open space along the drainage channel in the east-southeast portion of the site. In the previous version of the master plan map, the property had identified the athletic fields as open space. While these fields provide additional open areas and educational/recreational space on campus, they are considered developed and cannot be considered open spaces in the context of a master plan.

Transportation and Traffic

A traffic impact analysis (TIA) was not required for the requested rezoning/master plan amendment.

The Master Plan Map shows a future vehicular access drive to Mount Clinton Pike that would provide an additional connection to the campus and access to Parking Lot 3. As shown on the Master Plan Map, the driveway connecting to Mount Clinton Pike does not meet access management requirements. Staff has requested that the proposed access align with the existing driveway across Mount Clinton Pike used by Christian Light Publications. The applicant has indicated with a notation on the Master Plan Map that the final design and location of the Mount Clinton Pike entrance would be determined at a later date and would be subject to applicable City approval.

Public Water and Sanitary Sewer

Staff has no concerns with the requested rezoning/master plan amendment regarding water and sanitary sewer matters.

Conclusion

The applicant is requesting approval of the minimum off-street parking plan for the school use per Zoning Ordinance Section 10-3-25 (12). Based on the *Guidelines for School Facilities in Virginia's Public Schools (2021)*, the applicant identifies a need for 200 parking spaces to serve school staff, visitors, and students. Staff recommends approval of a required minimum 200 off-street parking spaces for the school use.

The applicant is also requesting approval of the 2026 Master Plan amendment, which reflects current single-parcel configuration and guides future development, including additional educational and support buildings, athletic facilities, parking modifications, and circulation improvements. The proposed uses are consistent with the purpose of the I-1 district and the Comprehensive Plan's institutional designation. Staff recommends approval of the Master Plan amendment.

Chair Baugh asked if there any questions for staff.

Vice Chair Porter said I have one question about the potential access from the EMU [Eastern Mennonite University] property. Are those athletic fields that are adjacent to the property?

Ms. Rupkey said there is an existing athletic field along this side.

Ms. Dang said Ms. Rupkey, I have a question. On the other slide that shows EMU, you are showing where a connection could be made. That is not the location of the future easement, which is yet to be determined. Is that correct?

Ms. Rupkey said correct. Thank you for clarifying. It is a potential location of how it could be accomplished, not the final location.

Chair Baugh said we will now invite the applicant representative to come forward.

Gil Colman, Colman Engineering, and Paul Leaman, Head of School for Eastern Mennonite School came forward. Mr. Colman said good evening, Chair Baugh, Commissioners, and Councilmember. Thank you for reviewing this application for us and considering the master plan amendment and parking requirements. We are here in case you have any questions. Everything staff presented reflects our interests.

Vice Chair Porter said I have a question about the request to relax the landscaping requirements within the actual parking [lot], and also relaxing the five-foot [parking lot] setbacks with the residential areas. What is the rationale for that, and what is the impact on your neighbors?

Mr. Colman said that is interesting because the setback we have is, I forget, five feet or a 10-foot setback. It is really more a consideration for the future, where we have one of the parking lots right adjacent to EMU that could be an issue. For the most part, that is not an issue for us because we are already more than 10 feet back in most of the parking situations. It is really more in one area that could be an issue. The consideration is to have a separation and buffer between parking and adjacent properties. Especially in this case, it is talking about residential property, to make sure there are no car lights and things like that impacting a residential neighborhood and residential use. But there is no residential use right now surrounding EMS.

Vice Chair Porter said can we bring the map up really fast? I want you to point out where that would be the case.

Mr. Colman said [referring to the campus map] on the left side, that is just a narrow part where that could be an issue. That is the only place right now that could be an issue. There is not really another place right now. That is right adjacent to the athletic fields for EMU. One of the things that could be put in there is a fence, for example. A fence satisfies that requirement. I do [unintelligible] in terms of blocking light or anything like that, but it satisfies the requirement.

Vice Chair Porter said if there were a larger residential neighborhood around this, I might have a different feeling.

Mr. Colman said that is right, there is none.

Mr. Leaman said EMU is considered residential. I am not sure what would be considered on the other side of Parkwood Drive; there are some houses, but that is across the street. There on the left of the diagram, where there is just the little green strip before EMU's property begins, there is a pretty large green buffer between that boundary and EMU's turf soccer field. The City also put in, very close to that boundary, the generators to save on electric demand. They are not shown [on the campus map] because they are on EMU's property, but they are probably right around that boundary line as well.

Vice Chair Porter said I know there is a close association between the school and the university. Would you be effectively offering up your parking for potential athletic venues at EMU as well?

Mr. Leaman said yes, it happens a lot.

Mr. Colman said there is a lot of collaboration between the entities there, which makes sense. It is a good way to use that parking lot as they put in more parking lots. It works out pretty well.

Mr. Leaman said I was thinking where you were talking about the setback being limited, it was along Parkwood Drive because of the added width there and making that closer to Parkwood Drive. It is pretty much a culverted area.

Mr. Colman said the requirement is 50 percent of that space, and we are not even there. We will be all right with that. The offset of landscaping, which was the second part of your question, is also to allow placement of landscaping other than within the islands. In this case, even in our plan, we are showing landscaping within the islands. I feel like if that is doable, we will do it. Otherwise, we are reserving the opportunity to put landscaping around the edges. Another point to make is that most of this parking is already there. From the standpoint of redeveloping that parking, because it is existing parking, we do not have to comply with parking landscape requirements in that case. If it is new parking or new areas, then we do. That does not mean that we will not necessarily add more islands. In fact, this shows some more islands where there are none right now. That may occur that way or not. Right now, we are reserving the option of having landscaping surrounding the parking area. It is within a limited space, within 15 feet of that area. We are probably going to stay within that space anyway. There is already some landscaping that is compliant with that.

Commissioner Jezior said based on the tables, you are really only adding 25 parking spaces, correct? It is just allocating 200 for the school specifically.

Mr. Colman said yes. The parking spaces are added because of some displacement of the bus parking, which right now is occurring on the tennis courts. We hope to clean up all of that and arrange it a little better. We have an area that was already impervious or semi-impervious, and we are working with that. We are going to use that for parking and move the buses to the side where they can be more easily accessed and not in front of these buildings.

Councilmember Dent said it seems to me that since it is already zoned R-3 and B-2 with institutional overlay, the setbacks normally associated with residential, even though it is zoned residential, would not really apply. Is that correct?

Mr. Colman said that is correct. We have a 10-foot setback throughout the property. That is the setback. That was also by master plan. We did that a couple of iterations ago, and we are maintaining that.

Commissioner Kettler said I have a question on the calculation for the parking spots. Can you go back to that slide? I am not terribly familiar with these guidelines. I was wondering, are these guidelines that are generally brought up by the state that you ought to follow, or are there other calculations that work here?

Mr. Colman said I am not as familiar with them either. That is something that staff made us aware of. In the past, we had discussed certain numbers that EMS was comfortable with, saying this is the number of parking spaces we need, and that is what we were going with. Staff pointed out during this time that the requirements are in the ordinance to follow the guidelines of Virginia public schools. I do not know if it is guidance or a firm requirement, but that is what we utilized for it. We certainly have more parking than what we need.

Mr. Leaman said we certainly have ample parking. Often, we share our parking lots with VMRC [Virginia Mennonite Retirement Community] and with EMU.

Commissioner Kettler said part of what I am thinking is that it seems like the guidelines suggest that every single staff member drives a single-occupancy vehicle.

Ms. Dang said these are recommendations from the Virginia Department of Education. They are not requirements, and our ordinance does not require it. Staff has used this to help guide us in the absence of other guidance or available standards.

Commissioner Kettler said is there a way to approve this with the option of them making less parking if they so desire?

Ms. Dang said I suppose you could recommend less.

Commissioner Kettler said to be clear about my thinking, I do not want to delay this anymore or deny it in any fashion. I am wondering whether there might be a way to provide some flexibility for the applicant.

Ms. Dang said we were comfortable with what they are comfortable accepting with the 200, because they are proposing to provide 435 total spaces on the property. We thought the requirement is only 200, which is less than half of what they are going to provide. Meaning they do not have to construct the other 235 if they choose not to. The master plan is only going to require the 200.

Commissioner Kettler said I was not clear on that, so I appreciate that.

Mr. Colman said I do not know how many students drive either. Maybe the students pick up some of those spaces.

Councilmember Dent said I found it interesting that one-third of the enrollment is for student parking. They are middle and high school, and elementary school. Only the high school students would actually drive. Is the high school included in this map as well?

Mr. Leaman said yes.

Councilmember Dent said they would be the only ones actually driving, the high school students.

Mr. Leaman said I do not think we would have close to 200 cars parked on campus every day. However, there are events that fill the parking.

Vice Chair Porter said how often would you get up to 435?

Mr. Leaman said I would say rarely. What happens is particular event spaces will be too small. If we are playing a local public school, the gym lot is not quite adequate, so it spills out front. If we have a large event in the auditorium, that spills over to the dining-area parking. People just need to walk farther, which is what happens now.

Vice Chair Porter said you host a couple of churches on-site for the weekends as well. I have seen those parking lots pretty full.

Mr. Leaman said yes.

Commissioner Kettler said it sounds like some of the uses we are talking about, gym uses, general school uses, and church uses, would tend to be at different times depending on the event. Is that fair?

Mr. Colman said they are, but they tend to fill whichever parking lot they are utilizing. I have seen all the parking full sometimes, but it is very rare to have everything full.

Vice Chair Porter said I wanted to ask a quick question about changing the circulation pattern for pickup and drop-off.

Mr. Leaman said there would be a limited amount of parking at the very front of the school for guests. We have a lot of visitors and guests. We are an enrollment-based school. We want families to come visit, and it is disappointing when they cannot park in the front and have to find their way to the front entrance by parking at the gym or the dining hall. Parking is not exciting money for donors to give toward, so I am not promising parking will be a high priority because we do meet our general needs with parking. Long term, we would love to have much more parking in the front. That would allow a connection without going out on Parkwood Drive from the gym parking lot to the dining hall parking lot, with angular parking that would designate the direction of traffic flow. Sometimes we have people going backwards in our current circular drive because parking is parallel. It is hard to know which way to go if you are a guest and not familiar with the campus.

Vice Chair Porter said you would make it one way?

Mr. Leaman said it would be one way.

Vice Chair Porter said is there any eventual desire to try to connect the elementary school in a way where you can actually drive from one side to the other? My concern is that there is a lot of congestion on Route 42, particularly early in the morning and in the afternoon for pickup. I would be concerned about traffic trying to leave the campus through the elementary school. I was curious whether there would be any attempt to try to do that.

Mr. Leaman said topography really does not allow for that, which is why we have forced parents of elementary students to park in the gym parking lot. There is very limited parking on the elementary side, really only for handicap accessibility or elderly individuals. We like kids to walk, so we are good with the footbridge.

Commissioner Kettler said it looks on Google maps like there is about five spaces...

Mr. Leaman said for special events we partner with Virginia Mennonite Missions with that parking lot pretty regularly.

Mr. Colman said one of the plans for the loop behind the school was also to provide a queueing line for the elementary school. That is part of it, to try to get traffic in there instead of anybody going out to Route 42. This is concentrating everything in two entrances. Right now, there are four entrances. We will limit it to two, although it will be three with a double entrance on the west side. We are trying to minimize that because of traffic conflicts. Better circulation works for everybody coming in and out. I have had a child there before, and I know how it is. People trying to get in and out makes it a little difficult.

Councilmember Dent said it all seems really complicated for something that ought to be fairly simple.

Mr. Colman said I think those are good questions.

Councilmember Dent said you know what you are doing, so it sounds like you have planned it well.

Chair Baugh asked if there were any questions for the applicant's representative. Hearing none, he asked if there was anyone in the room or on the phone wishing to speak to the request.

Ron March said good evening, members of the Commission. I am the owner of Sit Means Sit in Harrisonburg. We are a dog training franchise. I have been working with the City zoning staff for—

Chair Baugh said this is to speak on the matter that was just presented.

Mr. March said oh, sorry. I am sorry.

Chair Baugh said we will get to other public comments at the end of the meeting. For anybody who wishes to comment on the proposed master plan amendments for Eastern Mennonite School and the parking issue.

Chair Baugh closed the public hearing and opened the matter for discussion.

Vice Chair Porter said I guess my question is, do we take these separately or together?

Commissioner Baugh said any objection to taking them together?

Commissioners said no.

Commissioner Kettler said unless somebody wants to vote on them separately, I do not. The only thing I am thinking is that since we recently had a work session in large part on parking and this kind of issue, I am thinking again about why this is before Planning Commission. I am struggling to think of a reason why I would ever vote no for something like this. I think that is something to consider in the zoning reform process.

Councilmember Dent said I had a similar question. Why do we even need to go through this?

Commissioner Kettler said it says in the ordinance that it requires it.

Councilmember Dent said there ought to be some way of streamlining it. You can do what you want with your parking. I do not know.

Chair Baugh said staff, do you want to speak to that?

Ms. Dang said we have proposed some amendments. At the last work session, we were seeking your input on what those numbers and values should be. What we have proposed is that for public schools, kindergarten through 12th grade, it would be determined based on the public school entity. For private schools, we would consider their parking with their special exception review and consider a parking plan at that time. I am going off memory. I do not know that we have resolved the colleges and universities question.

Mr. Russ said correct, we have not resolved that part yet, but we are still working through it [for private colleges and universities].

Chair Baugh said it is not rocket science. Under the existing ordinance, we have a master plan, and if you are going to change it, you have to come tell us. Hopefully, this will be part of looking at

streamlining things that look like they could be handled administratively. We cannot do that tonight.

Vice Chair Porter said I move that we approve the request from Eastern Mennonite School to approve the required number of off-street parking spaces and also approve its request to amend the master plan at 701 and 801 Parkwood Drive and at 1251 Virginia Avenue.

Commissioner Jezior said second.

Chair Baugh called for a roll call vote.

Commissioner Jezior	Aye
Vice Chair Porter	Aye
Councilmember Dent	Aye
Commissioner Kettler	Aye
Chair Baugh	Aye

The motion to recommend approval of the required number of off-street parking spaces and the master plan amendment for Eastern Mennonite School passed (5-0). The recommendation will move forward to City Council on October 13, 2026.

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