

**NEW BUFFALO AREA SCHOOLS
BOARD OF EDUCATION SPECIAL SESSION
Performing Arts Center
1112 E. Clay Street
P.O. Box 280
New Buffalo, MI 49117
July 8, 2026
6:00 PM**

New Buffalo Area Schools will be a beacon of academic excellence and individualized learning, where every student thrives in a supportive and inclusive environment. We will lead in preparing students for future success, driven by strong community partnerships and a commitment to growth and sustainability.

1. Call to Order by President Denise Churchill - Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag.
2. Roll Call: Denise Churchill, Stephen Donnelly, John Haskins, Jennifer Summers, Vanessa Thun, Greg Vosberg, Lisa Werner
Absent: Haskins and Vosberg
Also in Attendance: Mr. Adam Bowen, Superintendent of Schools
Devinnie Wysocki, Adm. Asst. to Superintendent
3. Items too Late for Printed Agenda: None
4. Adoption of the Agenda
Motion: Thun
Second: Werner
All ayes, motion carried.
5. Communications: None
6. Committee Report(s)
7. Bison Preserve Presentation: Leeward Ventures, Brian Papke
Brian Papke of Leeward Ventures presented the preliminary concept for the proposed Bison Preserve residential development on approximately 10 western acres of the New Buffalo Area Schools-owned preserve. Mr. Papke provided an overview of Leeward Ventures, the project's vision, and the development objectives, which include creating a mixed residential community featuring a variety of housing types, attainable workforce housing, buildable lots for the Building Trades Program, and the preservation of natural open space. He discussed the benefits of clustered development, including environmental conservation, shared amenities, architectural cohesion, and phased construction. The presentation also outlined proposed housing types, affordability components through the Brownfield Housing Tax Increment Financing (TIF) program, and the project's anticipated timeline, with site construction projected to begin in spring 2027 pending approvals. Mr. Papke noted that environmental studies engineering work, and development agreements remain in progress, emphasizing that the concept is preliminary and will continue to evolve as planning advances. (Full Report Attached)

Thun: With the TIF is this income based? If you make too much money you will not qualify, correct.
Papke: That is correct.

Summers: What happens if we do not get approved for TIF?
Papke: It is the driver and it is necessary to have this and it also is to keep the prices down.

Summers: Which unit types will be constructed first?
Papke: I would like to spread it out but I would like to get more engineering data before we commit.

Bowen: Can you touch upon the rental part of it.
Papke: Ownership would be Leeward Ventures and partner with someone locally who can be hands on long term. We would also offer an own to rent.

Werner: Concern about the amount of traffic. Do you know what traffic improvements or concerns there would be.
Papke: There will be an expected increase in traffic. This would of course be a different times of the day. We would anticipate improvement at the entry to the development. We would work with the road commission on that entry portion as well.

Donnelly: With the goal of the Building Trades lots, do you have that considered where that fits into the phasing part of the project?
Papke: Designing a cottage community, a detached environment for those building trades lots to be located. Including the program into the initial phase of the development.

Churchill: Townhome style designated 18 units and cottage style designated 23 rental. Would you offer the option to the renter to purchase? Confirm is someone was to purchase a Type A and qualifying for the AI, they would have to sell at a certain rate that falls under the deed restrictions?
Papke: As long as we get the financing piece of that together, I feel that would be possible. Yes, the owner would have to sell at a certain rate that falls under the deed restrictions?

Superintendent Bowen: Can you talk about the natural landscape and keeping an environmentally safe development.
Papke: I have spent several years walking through the property and ideally keeping those wetlands safe and protected. Keeping the mature trees and environment as sound as we possibly can.

Werner: Where do you think access points will be?
Papke: Create a new trail head where we can lead from the sidewalk to the trail system.

Superintendent Bowen: Concerns about light pollution.
Papke: Generally try to avoid street lights. Using wall sconces so that there is not any glare. Soft shroud style lighting.

Summers: Buffering between the development and existing homes.
Papke: I would like to keep the natural buffering and plant where need and add fencing if necessary.

Churchill: Are you willing to provide any Bonds/Escrow Funds?
Papke: I am not opposed to that and I would discuss that with my financier.

Donnelly: Can you tell us about your experience of projects you have done in the past?

Papke: I have worked on a similar projects in the Grand Rapids area. Eastbrook Homes (development design lead). White Lake (White Hall) and Holland Michigan.

Werner: Have you ever not finished a project? If so, what was the remedy.

Papke: Project in Caledonia in 2007. The market completely dried up, we sold the lots to recover the money and the remedy was amicable.

Churchill: Could you provide the high level summary of what the anticipated cost will be to complete the project. What financial responsibility the district has in that?

Papke: The school district should have no fiscal responsibility whatsoever. I anticipate 31 million, 3 million for roads and utilities but will need additional engineering data. A good community investment.

Thun: What are the anticipated HOA fees?

Papke: Too early to tell.

Churchill: Is there any information from the Wetland studies at this time to help address any concerns to the public?

Papke: It is in progress, it should be done by now but we should have this in the next couple of weeks.

Churchill: What are the safeguards to keep the development well maintained over time?

Papke: Rules written into the HOA with the developer. Part of the Planned Unit Development requirements from the township.

Churchill: What potential second access could we utilize?

Papke: We are looking into another access into the development that would need to be reviewed and approved by the township.

Thun: Flex zoning in the township, are they in favor?

Papke: Yes, they are. Density per acre determines what they will allow. As long as the unit count is met, they should be open to it.

Churchill: Could you provide a timeline, understanding of how long it will take?

Papke: If all the items are approved as well as TIF is approved it could be possible to break ground in Spring 2027. It could be 2, 3, or 4 phases (we don't know what that will be right now) 3-5 year build out except for the Building Trades lots.

8. Expressions from the Public

Each person's public comments are limited to 3 minutes per public participation period.

Carter Vraavis expressed concerns regarding drainage, water management, and sewer infrastructure, questioning whether the existing infrastructure could adequately support the proposed development.

Bekki Kissman questioned the need for a homeowner's association (HOA), asking why homeowners would pay HOA fees for services such as lawn maintenance.

Marline Kissman commented that the proposed development resembled a Chicago-style subdivision and expressed concerns about lot sizes, density, and whether there would be adequate space for amenities such as swimming pools.

Vance Price, speaking as a resident and not in his capacity with the City, stated that many local employees commute from LaPorte and Michigan City because housing in New Buffalo is expensive. He noted that rental costs in neighboring communities are comparable to those proposed and shared that purchasing a Building Trades home significantly improved his family's quality of life by allowing them to live in New Buffalo rather than commute from St. Joseph. He also spoke positively about the quality of the Building Trades homes.

Ryan Dempsey stated that he has attended most meetings regarding the project and believes workforce housing is needed in the community but does not believe the proposed location or plan is the appropriate solution. He expressed concerns regarding preservation of the property, traffic increases, the absence of sidewalks, and felt information regarding the project was not easily accessible. He asked the Board to reconsider the proposal.

Derrick Jager thanked the Board for providing opportunities for public engagement throughout the process. He stated that the development would help create a family-friendly neighborhood while providing housing opportunities for future teachers. He also highlighted the Building Trades Program as a point of pride and noted that the project supports both students and teachers.

Shannon Schroeder, a fourth-generation New Buffalo family member, expressed concerns about increased traffic near the school, impacts to neighborhood wildlife, construction noise, and the overall density of the development. She asked the Board to consider the impact it would have on existing residents while complimenting the developer for the presentation.

Ben Smock, owner of Hummingbird Lounge, stated that only a small portion of his workforce currently resides in New Buffalo, while many employees commute from Indiana and surrounding Michigan communities. He emphasized the year-round need for attainable housing to attract and retain employees and voiced support for the proposed development.

David Engman questioned HOA requirements, affordability qualifications, resale restrictions to preserve affordability, and requested additional due diligence regarding wetlands. He also expressed concerns about housing density and the process of making units available.

Brianna Fonseca-Perkins, a New Buffalo community member, stated that the proposed development does not address affordability concerns from her perspective. She expressed concerns regarding traffic congestion near the school and believed the overall development plan was not well thought out.

Sophia Giannetti, a New Buffalo teacher and graduate, shared that although she hoped to remain in the community after accepting a teaching position, housing costs required her to live elsewhere. She expressed support for the project as a way to help teachers remain in the community they serve.

Kelly Perkins stated that when purchasing her home, she was informed that the adjacent wetlands would remain undisturbed. She expressed concern over impacts to wildlife, neighborhood character, construction near the school, and quality of life for nearby residents, including her family. She questioned whether the proposal remained focused on benefiting students.

Justin Cohen, representing Petite Acres, encouraged the community to remain open to innovative solutions. He stated that attainable housing is needed, noting that the Tax Increment Financing (TIF) structure would help maintain affordability over an extended period. He also emphasized the value of supporting local businesses and workforce housing while continuing to invest in the Building Trades Program.

Samantha Howe, who lives adjacent to the proposed development, expressed concerns about prolonged construction activity, construction hours, traffic, declining property values, and the project's impact on neighboring residents. She suggested considering an alternate location for the development.

Gunner Hunterman opposed the project, expressing concerns regarding impacts on wildlife, construction noise, affordability, and the overall need for development.

Andy Mack, a purchaser of a Building Trades home, praised the quality of the construction but opposed the proposed development due to its proximity to his property.

Keith Saulsgiver stated that he purchased his home with the expectation that the adjacent wooded area would remain unchanged. He expressed concerns regarding impacts to wildlife, neighborhood character, and property values, and encouraged reconsideration of the proposal.

9. Remarks from the Superintendent:

Thank you everyone for your comments and your interest tonight. These projects are not easy and change is tough for many of us. The Board is not interested in being a developer or selling homes, we are interested in educating children and the building trades program allows us to do that. We value this program very much and it is part of our education program.

Almost 30 years ago, Davey Olmes donated the majority of the property, and the district has added two additional parcels over the past five years. Out of the 44 acres, it is anticipated that 12 of those acres will be buildable, with the remaining acres being put into a preserve in which we will improve both the wetlands and trail system.

The Bison Preserve means preserving our schools, the wetlands, the community, and the workforce in our community. That is an important need for us. We are trying to do our best due diligence and invite the community to make sure that we are informing our community. The

The board of education remains deeply committed to our CTE building trades program. The Bison Preserve allows us to continue educating students that want to pursue the trades as a career for the next 15 years by building quality homes. It is our sincere hope that these students will graduate from NBAS with the precise skillsets needed to confidently pursue high-demand trades careers.

As we focus on educating students through this unique opportunity, the project also presents a powerful way for NBAS to help alleviate broader challenges within our community. For the past 15 years, New Buffalo Area Schools has faced declining enrollment, driven largely by the rise of short-term rentals and skyrocketing home prices that price young families out of the area. We heard that from a couple of our teachers. Our new teaching staff can't afford to live in the community they teach in.

Furthermore, the Bison Preserve offers a rare opportunity to provide workforce housing for those who want to live in the very community where they work. This will be structurally secured through deed restrictions on purchased homes and enforced TIF requirements.

Brian has continuously demonstrated his unwavering support and commitment to these goals, which is precisely why we are ready to move this project forward.

Our next steps will be for the board of education to finalize and approve the development agreement for the Bison Preserve. Following that, the board will need to take action on site plan approval. Once the site plan is approved, Leeward Ventures can take those plans to the township to initiate the PUD process. Simultaneously, we look forward to initiating the TIF process.

10. Remarks from the Board President and Members

Werner: Thank you to everybody for coming. It is important to hear from you. I know a lot of you are concerned and I am paying attention to that. We have those same concerns. Davy Ohms sold the property at a very discounted price with the understanding that it would be developed through our building trades. The property at one time was potentially set to be developed into government subsidized housing, but we never got very far with that. We listened to what the neighbors had to say. The other option is for the district to sell the property because for us to own property long term doesn't make sense, other than walking the trails. Concerns from all of us, we are paying attention. We have the best interest of the school district number one. The City of New Buffalo is changing so much.

Thun: We want to see that our teachers have an opportunity to live in the community that they work. We are trying to be cognizant of what we do with the property, we could also sell it.

Churchill: Thank you to everybody for coming up and speaking. We all appreciate your concerns, the board has a lot to consider here. We took diligent notes and you gave us some good points to consider. This has been a project that has been under consideration for three years now. We have had countless board meetings and they are always open to the public. Our minutes and agendas are posted in ample time to read them and know what is being discussed at the meetings. Everybody is welcome to come and speak publicly at those board meetings. You are also welcome to reach out to our administrative offices and request a meeting. If you would like to come in and speak with the superintendent and myself. When we started this in 2023, we involved our students, our parents, and staff in coming up with a name for this potential development and it reflects what we are trying to hold on to, our schools, our wetlands, community, and our workforce. We are committed to moving forward as long as it is a viable project. The board's motivation is straightforward, our building trades program has been in place for 25 years and we have run out of affordable land to sustain it. The Bison Preserve uses the property that the district has owned for over 30 years. It gives our students a live classroom to build real skills, it creates deed restricted housing for local work force and public servants earning 80-120% AMI. It preserves the wetlands and the forest rather than developing them. We do believe that the benefits here are real but they are only achievable if the project is built responsibly. We heard you, we hear you. We will continue to hear you and we welcome your comments. With regard to the noise, the traffic, the environment, and the wetlands, you can't build on wetlands, that is why we are building around them. Mr. Papke has put together a very thoughtful presentation of how he would like to see land developed with our input and support. He has continually made comments about how he wants to preserve the nature in there. The trails will continue to be open to the public. I ask you to be open-minded, and know that we have good intentions.

11. Discussion Item(s)

12. Other Business

13. Adjournment

Motion: Summers

Second: Thun

All ayes, motion carried

Meeting adjourned at 7:48 p.m.

Respectfully submitted

Vanessa Thun, Secretary

BOARD OF EDUCATION

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Please note that this agenda is preliminary and may be revised prior to the meeting. Items may be added, removed, or modified as necessary.