

Planning Services Staff Report

For Ann Arbor City Planning Commission Meeting of May 19, 2026.

Subject: Greenhills School (850 Greenhills Drive) Special Exception Use and Site Plan for Planning Commission; SP25-0022.

Proposed Planning Commission Motion

The Ann Arbor Planning Commission hereby approves a modification to the Greenhills School Special Exception Use for a private school in the R1B (Single-Family Dwelling) district to increase the maximum enrollment to 750 students based on the following findings:

1. The location, size and character of the proposed use is compatible with the R1B (Single-Family Dwelling) district and neighborhood in which the site is situated.
2. The location and size of the proposed use, and its location and layout, will not unduly conflict with public utility systems or the transportation network that serves the site and neighborhood.
3. All applicable standards for the proposed use have been met.

And the Ann Arbor Planning Commission hereby approves the Greenhills School Site Plan dated March 20, 2026 to construct two additions to the existing building and pave a fire access road, and Landscape Modification to allow landscape elements which are part of a previously approved site plan to be maintained and continued as nonconforming, and Wetland Use Permit to impact 4,828 square feet of wetland buffer area and mitigate 7,242 square feet.

Staff Recommendation

Staff recommend **approval** of the modified Greenhills School Special Exception Use for a private school with up to 750 students at 850 Greenhills Drive because it compatible with its surroundings, does not cause inconvenience or conflicts, and meets all applicable criteria.

Staff recommend **approval** of the Greenhills School Site Plan for Planning Commission and Wetland Use Permit because the contemplated development will comply with all applicable ordinances, standards, and regulations and limits the disturbance of natural features to the minimum necessary to allow a reasonable use of the land.

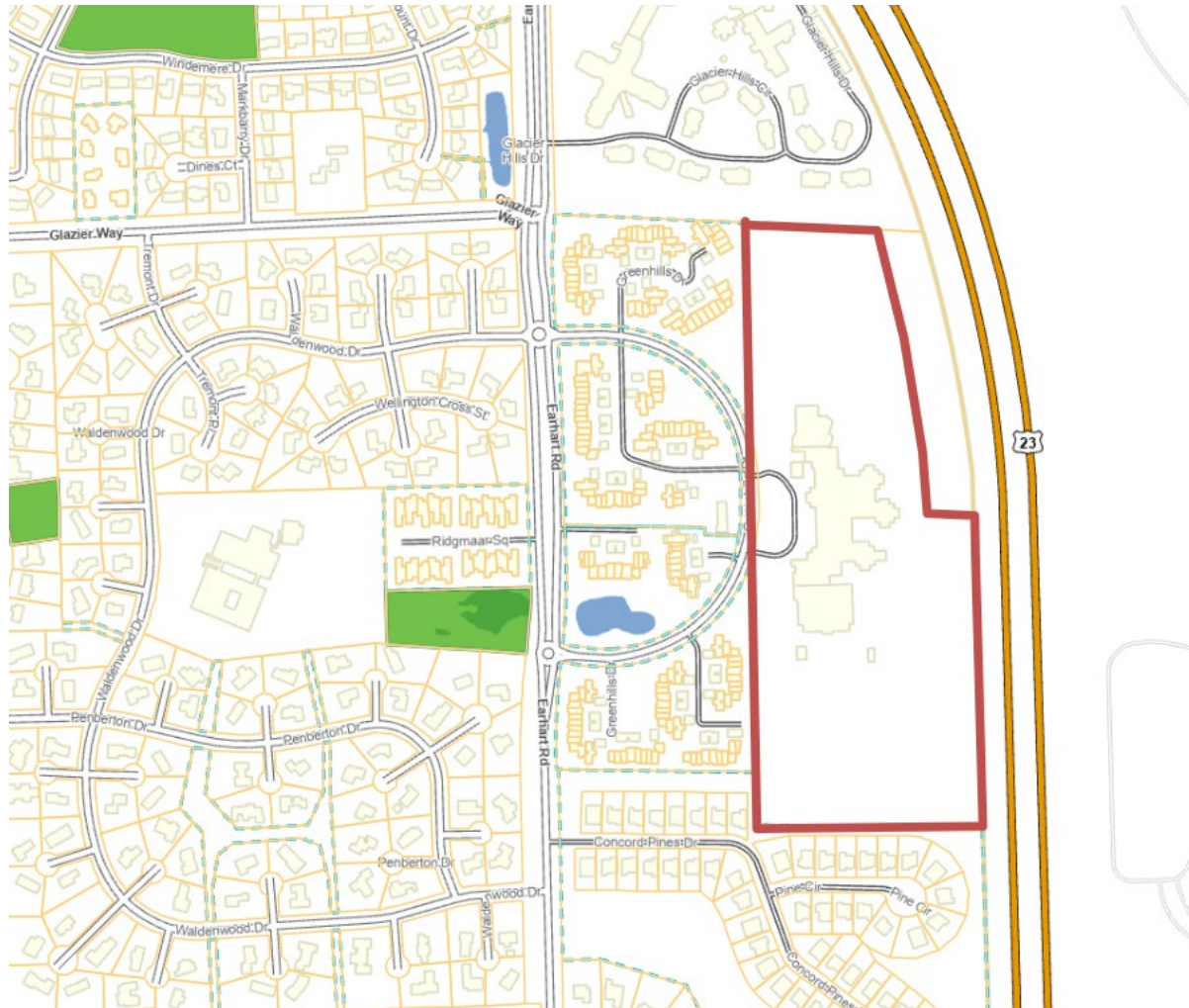
Summary and Location

This project to expand the Greenhills School at 850 Greenhills Drive contains four components:

- A request to modify an existing Special Exception Use for a private school in a single-family residential district from 545 students to 750 students.
- A proposed site plan to construct two additions to the existing school and pave a fire access road circling the building.
- A request for landscape modification approval to allow previously approved landscaping to remain as nonconforming.
- A Wetland Use Permit application to impact wetland buffer area.

Greenhills School is a private school for grades 6 through 12 on a 30-acre campus in the R1B (Single-Family Dwelling) district. The site is located on the east side of Greenhills Drive, which connects to Earhart Road between Glazier Way and Geddes Road on the east side of the City and is located in Ward 2.

Figure 1: Location Map with Subject Site outlined in red.



Report

Background

Greenhills School was approved for construction¹ on June 13, 1967 and opened in 1968. Site plans and site plan amendments for building additions, accessory buildings, and new, then expanded, athletic facilities were approved in 1969, 1984, 1988, 1995, 1998, 2001, 2007, 2013, 2015 and 2020. Two of the site plans included approved

¹ Private elementary, junior and senior high schools were permitted principal uses in the R1 districts from Chapter 55 Zoning/Unified Development Code inception in 1963 until the 1980s, then permitted with Special Exception Use approval.

Greenhills School Special Exception Use and Site Plan for Planning Commission
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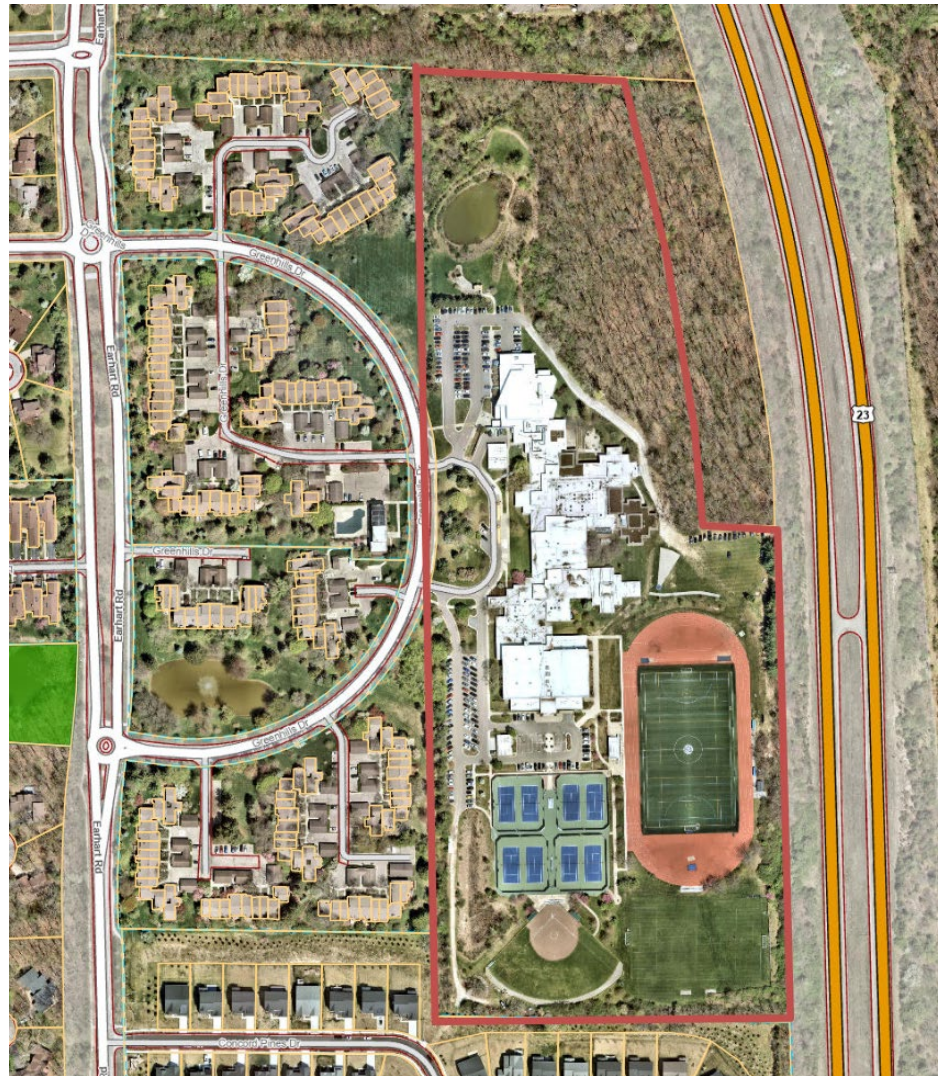
landscape modification requests to allow existing approved conditions to remain nonconforming (in 2015 and 2020).

A Special Exception Use was approved on December 20, 1994 for up to 510 students (455 were enrolled at the time) in conjunction with a site plan to add 52,500 square feet to the 74,400-square foot existing building. The Special Exception Use approval was modified on June 7, 2007 to allow up to 545 students in conjunction with a site plan for a new 10,000-square foot science wing, bringing the total building its current size.

A variance of 380 bicycle parking spaces was granted by the Zoning Board of Appeals in 1989 in conjunction with a site plan to construct a 6,850-square foot addition.

Today, the Greenhills School Middle and Upper School campus has a 140,000-square foot academic building with a gymnasium as well as a football stadium, track and field facilities, eight tennis courts, a soccer field, a baseball diamond and parking for 195 vehicles. Greenhills School has a current enrollment of over 700 students in grades 6 through 12, with approximately 100 faculty and staff.

Figure 2: 2025 aerial photo of Greenhills School



Special Exception Use Modification

Greenhills School requests to modify the condition imposed on their active Special Exception Use approval to increase the enrollment capacity from 545 students to 750 students. Although the proposed building additions will expand the academic building, these expansions will not increase the current enrollment. Rather, the request seeks to allow an already-increased enrollment primarily due to additional students accepted during and immediately after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Site Plan

Two small building additions with a total of 16,665 square feet are proposed to the northeast part of the existing building to expand science and technology instructional space and improving an existing variable-width gravel path around the east side of the building to a 20-foot-wide asphalt fire access road.

Creating the fire access road will remove a 36-inch cottonwood landmark tree and impact two areas of required wetland buffer. The removed landmark tree will be mitigated by planting eight new trees providing 18 caliper inches of replacement trees in total. Impacts and mitigation for wetland buffers are addressed by the Wetland Use Permit.

Landscape Modification

Per Section 5.30.1, modifications to certain requirements in Section 5.20 Landscaping, Screening and Buffering may be approved in specific circumstances, one of which is when no alterations to existing landscape elements are proposed to a site with an approved site plan (modification condition 6 of Section 5.30.1.B).

The proposed site plan for two building additions at the rear of the building and paving a fire access road do not alter the existing vehicular use area at the front of the site nor its required interior landscape islands or right-of-way screening.

Landscape modifications for this same reason have been approved with the past two site plan for Planning Commission approvals, SP15-008 to create an outdoor educational area approved on May 15, 2021, and SP19-040 to redevelop track and field facilities approved on April 21, 2020. The existing landscaping conditions were approved on July 2, 2007 as part of a site plan for City Council approval, file 9252R9.5c for a 10,000-square-foot addition.

Wetland Use Permit

Wetland buffers are provided the same protections as wetlands (Section 5.23.9.D) and depositing fill material in a wetland requires a wetland use permit (Section 5.29.4.A). The proposed development will impact a total of 4,828 square feet of wetland buffer area of two separate wetlands. The impacts will be mitigated by removing invasive species in the wetland and wetland buffer areas at a 1.5:1 ratio, restoring 7,242 square feet.

Staff Comments

Materials for the Special Exception Use, site plan and wetland use permit applications have received Stormwater, Urban Forest Natural Resources, Fire, Wetlands, SESC, Engineering, Planning, Solid Waste, and Transportation reviews. All requests for revisions have been addressed.

Prepared by: Alexis DiLeo, Principal Planner.

Reviewed by: Hank Kelley, Deputy Planning Manager.

Attachments:

- Aerial/Zoning/Parcel Maps.
- Special Exception Use Application.
- Greenhills School Site Plan (March 30, 2026).
- Wetland Use Permit Application.
- Additional Project Files ([STREAM file SP25-0022](#)).

Copied:

- Applicant: John Nickel, Greenhills School.
- Applicant/Engineer: Heath Hartt, Midwestern Consulting.
- Architects: Brandon Sundberg and Christa Azar, Integrated Design Solutions.
- Contractor: Jared Katz, J.S. Vig Construction.

APPENDIX

Criteria for Approval

Special Exceptions

As provided in Section 5.29.5.D, the Planning Commission shall apply the following criteria and make a finding that these criteria have been substantially met:

1. The proposed use(s) shall be of such location, size and character as to be compatible with the appropriate and orderly development of the zoning district and adjacent zoning districts in which the site is situated.
2. The location and size of the proposed use(s), the nature and intensity of the principal use and the accessory uses, the site layout and its relations to streets giving access to it, shall be such that traffic to and from, the assembly of persons in connection, and the effect on public services and facilities, will not be hazardous or inconvenient to the neighborhood nor unduly conflict with the normal traffic of the neighborhood.
3. The standards of density and required open space shall be at least equal to those required or a variance has been granted.

Reasonable conditions may be imposed upon approval of a Special Exception Use as provided in Section 5.29.5.E.

Site Plans

As provided in Section 5.29.6.B, the Planning Commission shall approve, approve with conditions, or deny a site plan and as provided in Section 5.29.6.C, shall make its decision based on the following criteria:

1. The contemplated development complies with all applicable local, state, and federal law, ordinances, standards, and regulations.
2. The development limits the disturbance of natural features to the minimum necessary to allow a reasonable use of the land, applying criteria for reviewing a natural features plan as provided in Section 5.29.6.F.

Landscape Modifications

As provided in Section 5.30.1.C, landscape modifications may be approved if:

1. The modifications are consistent with the purpose of Section 5.20 landscaping, screening and buffering requirements.
2. The eligibility and required conditions are met.
3. Justification is provided for consideration.

Wetland Use Permit

As provided in Section 5.29.4.G, wetland use permits shall be modified, approved (with or without conditions), or denied after considering the following criteria (summarized):

- Issuance is in the public interest, necessary to realize the benefits derived from the proposed activity and the proposed activity is otherwise lawful.
- The benefit is balanced against the reasonably foreseeable detriments of the proposed activity, considering:
 - The relative extent of the need of the proposed activity.
 - The availability of methods and alternatives to accomplish the expected benefits of the proposed activity.
 - The extent and permanence of effects of beneficial or detrimental effects that the proposed activity may have on other uses for the area.
 - The probable impact of each proposal in relation to cumulative effect by other activities in the watershed.
 - The probable effect on other recognized values, public health, or fish or wildlife.
 - The size of the wetland being considered.
 - The amount of remaining wetland in the general area.
 - The proximity to any waterway.
 - The economic value of the proposed land change to the general area.