

DATE OF DECISION: 2/19/2021

DATE OF MAILING: 2/19/2021

**BEFORE THE NEW BRITAIN TOWNSHIP
ZONING HEARING BOARD**

**RE: APPLICATION OF JOHN AND JESSICA HANDSCHUH FOR
THE PROPERTY LOCATED AT 142 NEW GALENA ROAD,
NEW BRITAIN TOWNSHIP, BUCKS COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA,
FURTHER IDENTIFIED AS TAX MAP PARCEL NO. 26-1-62**

FINDINGS OF FACT

1. On Thursday, January 21, 2021, at 7:00 p.m., the New Britain Township Zoning Hearing Board (“Board”) held a duly noticed hearing on the application of John and Jessica Handschuh (the “Applicants”).

2. The Board conducted the hearing through the use of an authorized telecommunications device¹, specifically the Zoom meetings platform. Such platform permits video and audio communication between individuals over a computer application.

3. The Board, the Board’s stenographer, the Applicants, the Applicants’ representatives, and interested members of the public were all able to view, hear and communicate with each other over the authorized telecommunications device.

4. The Applicants are the record co-owners of the property located at 142 New Galena Road, New Britain Township, also known as Bucks County Tax Map Parcel No. 26-1-62 (the “Property”). The Property is the subject of the instant application.

5. Notice of the January 21, 2021, hearing was published in advance of the hearing in the Thursday, January 7, 2021, and Thursday, January 14, 2021, editions of The Intelligencer, a newspaper publication of general circulation in New Britain Township. *See* Exhibit B-6.

6. Notice of the January 21, 2021, hearing was sent by first class mail on January 6, 2021, by Kelsey Harris (“Harris”), the New Britain Township Zoning Officer, to (a) all record owners of properties within New Britain Township surrounding the Property; and (b) to the adjoining municipality for any surrounding properties that are located in that municipality. *See* Exhibit B-9.

7. Harris posted notice of the January 21, 2021, hearing on the Property on January 7, 2021, at 9:53 a.m. *See* Exhibit B-10.

¹ During the pendency of the Governor’s emergency declaration regarding the COVID-19 virus, Act 15 of 2020 (“Act 15”) authorizes the Board to conduct a hearing through the use of an “authorized telecommunication device,” defined as “any device which permits, at a minimum, audio communication between individuals.” Hearings conducted pursuant to Act 15 do not require individual Board members to be physically present at the same location to achieve a quorum.

8. Pursuant to Act 15, notice of the January 21, 2021, hearing was posted on the New Britain Township website. The notice described the authorized telecommunications device technology (Zoom platform) to be used at the hearing.

9. The Board allowed for public participation at the January 21, 2021, hearing through both the authorized communications device, and through the submission of written questions or comments to the Board delivered by regular mail or email to Harris's attention at New Britain Township.

10. As the record co-owners of the Property, the Applicants have the requisite standing to prosecute this zoning hearing board application.

11. The Property is located in the SR-2, Suburban Residential, zoning district under the New Britain Township Zoning Ordinance (the "Zoning Ordinance").

12. The Property is improved with a single-family detached residential dwelling (use B1) and 2 accessory detached garages (use H1). Such uses are permitted by right in the SR-2 zoning district. *See* Zoning Ordinance §27-801.a.

13. The Applicants propose an addition to the existing single-family detached dwelling. The addition will connect the dwelling to one of the detached garages. *See* Exhibit B-3, Plan.

14. To permit the dwelling addition and garage connection, the Applicants seek a variance from Zoning Ordinance §27-802.b to permit a side yard setback of 0 feet, where the required minimum side yard setback is 25 feet. *See* Exhibit B-3, Plan.

15. Introduced as exhibits at the zoning hearing are the documents identified on Schedule A attached to this decision. Schedule A is incorporated by reference as though fully set forth herein at length.

16. In addition to the Applicants, Joseph Heffernan ("Heffernan") testified in support of the application at the hearing.

17. Heffernan owns and resides at 134 New Galena Road ("Heffernan Tract"). The Heffernan Tract is adjacent to the Property.

18. One individual appeared at the January 18, 2021, hearing through the authorized telecommunications device to observe the proceedings. One nearby property owner submitted written comments by email to Harris in support of the application. No one requested party status to the application before the Board.

19. According to Bucks County records, the Applicants acquired the Property in or around September 2017. The dwelling was constructed in or around 1954. The dwelling is a ranch-style home with 1,200 square feet of living space.

20. The Property is shaped like a long and narrow rectangle with an angled rear lot line. The Property's lot area is 1.3 acres. *See* Exhibit B-3, Plan.

21. The Property’s undersized lot area is a lawful non-conformity. The minimum lot area is 2 acres for a parcel improved with a single-family detached dwelling (use B1) in the SR-2 zoning district. *See* Zoning Ordinance §27-802.b.

22. The Property has 110 feet of frontage along New Galena Road. The side lot lines are 558.05 and 469.76 feet long. The angled rear lot line is 141.04 feet in length. *See* Exhibits B-1, Deed; and B-3, Plan.

23. The dwelling’s front wall is oriented toward New Galena Road. The dwelling is located at the front building setback line. Portions of the dwelling protrude beyond the 50 feet front yard setback limit. The Board finds that the dwelling’s front setback dimension is a lawful non-conformity. *See* Exhibit B-3, Plan.

24. The front detached garage that will be connected to dwelling via the addition is located to the side of the dwelling. Its front wall is roughly in line with the extended plane of the dwelling’s rear wall. *See* Exhibit B-3, Plan.

25. The majority of the front detached garage is located within the required minimum side yard. Portions of this detached garage protrude into the Heffernan Property, giving the detached garage a negative side yard setback. *See* Exhibit B-3, Plan.

26. The opposite side wall of the front detached garage is slightly inside the required minimum building setback line. This side wall generally aligns with the extended plane of the dwelling’s side wall. *See* Exhibit B-3, Plan.

27. The Applicants stated, and the Board finds, that the front detached garage was in this location when they acquired the Property. Bucks County records indicate the front detached garage was built in or around 1954. The Board finds that the front detached garage’s location is a lawful non-conformity. *See* Exhibit B-3, Plan.

28. The rear detached garage is a pole barn structure located in the Property’s far rear yard. Bucks County records indicate the pole barn was built in or around 1989. *See* Exhibit B-3, Plan.

29. Two (2) separate stone driveways serve the Property. A short driveway accesses New Galena Road near the common lot line with the Heffernan Tract, and connects to the front detached garage. *See* Exhibit B-12, Viewer.

30. A longer driveway is located along the opposite side lot line. This longer driveway connects New Galena Road to the pole barn detached garage in the Property’s rear yard. *See* Exhibit B-12, Viewer.

31. The Applicants stated, and the Board finds, that the dwelling and garages on the Property were in serious disrepair when they acquired the Property. The have since repaired the buildings.

32. The Applicants stated, and the Board finds, that they reside in the dwelling with their 2 young children. Their oldest child has special needs. The dwelling addition will allow their son to safely travel from the dwelling to the front garage.

33. The Applicants stated, and the Board finds, that the dwelling addition will be 1 story. It will contain a new great room and classroom area. The addition will also expand the kitchen, dining and living rooms in the existing dwelling. *See* Exhibit B-3, Plan.

34. The Applicants stated, and the Board finds, that the addition have a footprint of 887 square feet. It will connect to the dwelling's rear wall and the front garage's side wall. All portions of the addition will be within the building envelope. *See* Exhibits B-2, Impervious; and B-3, Plan.

35. The Applicants stated, and the Board finds, that by connecting the dwelling and the non-conforming front garage, the dwelling will now possess the garage's non-conforming side yard setback. This necessitates the need for the variance. *See* Exhibit B-3, Plan.

36. The Applicants stated, and the Board finds, that the dwelling addition cannot be modified or relocated to provide a greater side yard setback without relocating or demolishing the existing front detached garage. The Board does not find that to be a practical solution. *See* Exhibit B-3, Plan.

37. Heffernan stated, and the Board finds, that the Heffernan Tract is primarily improved with a single-family detached dwelling. A private road named Rue Saint Michel travels through an easement on the Heffernan Property to serve a residential community behind the Property and the Heffernan Tract. *See* Exhibits B-3, Plan; and B-12, Viewer.

38. Heffernan stated, and the Board finds, that the front detached garage encroaches into the easement for Rue Saint Michel. The garage does not have any impact on the dwelling on the Heffernan Property. *See* Exhibits B-3, Plan; and B-12, Viewer.

39. The Applicants stated, and the Board finds, that the proposed addition will be designed to complement the existing dwelling's architecture and materials. *See* Exhibit B-3, Plan.

40. The surrounding properties consist of similar style residences and lots. The Applicants stated that no nearby residents have raised any objection to the proposed dwelling addition or its location.

41. Due to the Property being a non-conforming lot with a non-conforming dwelling and front detached garage, the Property contains unique characteristics that support relief for the proposed dwelling together with the addition and existing garage to have a side yard setback of 0 feet². *See* Exhibit B-2, Plan.

42. The Zoning Ordinance's dimensional limitations imposes a hardship on the Property and the Applicant in that this regulation prevents a reasonably sized addition to a modest size older residential dwelling.

43. Subject to the conditions imposed herein, the proposed dwelling addition connecting the existing dwelling and front detached garage, their size and location, are harmonious

² At the hearing, the Board cautioned the Applicants that its findings and grant of relief are limited strictly to compliance with and/or a variance from the Zoning Ordinance. The Board's decision does not affect any private property rights that may affect the existing detached garage and dwelling, or the proposed addition, due to the negative setback.

with the Property's size and consistent with uses of other properties in the surrounding neighborhood.

CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

1. Required public notice of the date, time and location of the January 21, 2021, hearing was made by sufficient advanced publication, posting and mailing to affected property owners.

2. Required advanced notice of the authorized telecommunications device to be used at the January 21, 2021, hearing was made by sufficient posting on the New Britain Township publicly accessible internet website.

3. As required by Act 15, allowance for public participation at the January 21, 2021, hearing was made through the authorized telecommunications device and through the submission of written comments or questions by regular mail or email to Harris's attention at New Britain Township.

4. In order to show entitlement to a variance, use or dimensional, an applicant must demonstrate all the following elements:

- a. an unnecessary hardship stemming from unique physical characteristics or conditions will result if the variance is denied;
- b. because of such physical circumstances or conditions, there is no possibility that the property can be developed in strict conformity with the provisions of the zoning ordinance and a variance is necessary to enable the reasonable use of the property;
- c. the hardship has not been created by the applicant;
- d. granting the variance will not alter the essential character of the neighborhood nor be detrimental to the public welfare; and
- e. the variance sought is the minimum that will afford relief.

5. The Board finds that the requested side yard setback variance is a dimensional variance. A dimensional variance involves a request to adjust or vary a zoning ordinance provision by degree to be able to otherwise use a property consistent with the regulations. *See Dunn v. Middletown Township Zoning Hearing Board*, 143 A.3d 494 (Pa Commw. 2015); *see also Constantino v. ZHB of Forest Hills Borough*, 636 A.2d 1266 (Pa. Commw. 1994).

6. Ordinarily, an applicant can demonstrate "unnecessary hardship" for a use or dimensional variance by showing that a property's physical characteristics are such that the property cannot be used for any permitted purpose, or can only conform to a permitted purpose at prohibitive expense; or that the property has either no value or only distress value for any permitted purpose.

7. However, under Pennsylvania law, a dimensional variance is subject to a lesser standard of proof to establish unnecessary hardship than a use variance. *See Hertzberg v. Zoning Board of Adjustment of City of Pittsburgh*, 721 A.2d 43 (Pa. 1998) (when seeking a dimensional variance within a permitted use, the owner is asking only for a *reasonable adjustment* of the zoning regulations. The grant of a dimensional variance is of lesser moment than the grant of a use variance, since the latter involves a proposal to use the property in a manner that is wholly outside the zoning regulation).

8. When deciding whether a hardship has been established in dimensional variance cases, the *Hertzberg* rationale authorizes the Board to consider multiple factors, including the characteristics of the surrounding neighborhood. *See Hertzberg, supra*, at 47.

9. The Board concludes that the fact that the Property is a non-conforming lot, together with the existing non-conforming locations of the dwelling and front garage, establish a hardship under the *Hertzberg* standard sufficient to justify the variance requested.

10. Based upon the credible testimony provided, the Board concludes that the proposed addition will be between the existing dwelling and front garage. It will be entirely within the building envelope. Connecting these 2 existing structures through addition grafts the garage's zero feet setback on to the dwelling. *See Exhibit B-3, Plan*.

11. Critical to the Board's conclusion is that the dwelling addition will follow the same building lines as the dwelling's and front detached garage's side walls. The addition will not increase the garage's existing protrusion on to the Heffernan Tract.

12. Provided the Applicants comply with the reasonable conditions attached to the relief granted herein, the Applicants have met the Zoning Ordinance and Pennsylvania law requirements for the variance relief to construct and install the addition connecting the dwelling to the front detached garage and producing a side yard setback of 0 feet.

13. The approved variance will not alter the essential character of the neighborhood in which the Property is located nor substantially impair the appropriate use or development of adjacent properties.

14. The approved variance will not be detrimental to the public welfare.

15. The conditions and circumstances imposing a hardship upon the Property for the approved variance are not of the Applicants' own doing.

16. The approved variance represents the minimum variance that will afford relief and represents the least modification of the zoning regulations under the circumstances.

DECISION

AND NOW, this 19th day of February, 2021, upon consideration of the foregoing Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law, the New Britain Township Zoning Hearing Board hereby **GRANTS** the Applicants' request for a variance from Zoning Ordinance §27-802.b to permit the addition to connect the existing front detached garage and dwelling and produce a side yard setback of 0 feet, subject to the following conditions:

1. The proposed dwelling addition and related improvements’ dimensions, size, location and appearance shall be in accordance with the definitive plans, evidence, representations, exhibits and credible testimony made and submitted at the hearing.

2. This decision does not waive any requirements of any other applicable New Britain Township Ordinance(s); and the proposed improvement(s) and/or use(s) must meet all other applicable federal, state, county and New Britain Township regulations and codes.

NEW BRITAIN TOWNSHIP
ZONING HEARING BOARD

DATE: 2/19/2021

/s/ Chuck Coxhead
Chuck Coxhead, Chair

DATE: 2/19/2021

/s/ Cathy Basilli
Cathy Basilli, Member

DATE: 2/19/2021

/s/ Jim Scanzillo
Jim Scanzillo, Member

Thomas J. Walsh III, Esquire
Solicitor, New Britain Township Zoning Hearing Board
3655 Route 202, Suite 105
Doylestown, PA 18902

Note to Applicant: This Decision is NOT an authorization to build. Zoning and building permits must be obtained from New Britain Township prior to the commencement of any construction.

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SCHEDULE A – TABLE OF EXHIBITS

Exhibit	Description
B-1	Zoning Hearing Board application. Attachments to Application: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Hand drawn site plan• List of property owners within 500 feet• Deed dated 9/3/2016• Heffernan statement
B-2	Determination by Zoning Officer dated 11/19/20. Township file documents: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Zoning & Earth Disturbance permit application (10/29/20)• Zoning Use permit application (10/29/20)• Impervious Coverage sheet
B-3	Site Plans, 2 sheets, showing existing structures and proposed addition
B-4	Letter to The Intelligencer dated 12/30/20 forwarding public notice of 1/21/21 hearing for advertisement
B-5	Public Notice of the hearing on 1/21/21
B-6	Proof of publication of public notice in 1/7/21 and 1/14/21 editions of The Intelligencer
B-7	Letter to Applicants dated 12/30/20 providing notice of the 1/21/21 hearing
B-8	List of the record owners of all properties within 500 feet of the Property
B-9	Affidavit of mailing to property owners – notice mailed on 1/6/21 by Kelsey Harris
B-10	Affidavit of posting of public notice at property – notice posted on 1/7/21 at 9:53 a.m. by Kelsey Harris
B-11	Letter of support from Theresa and Joseph Froshour, 138 Rue St. Michel
B-12	Bucks County Viewer Map and Aerial