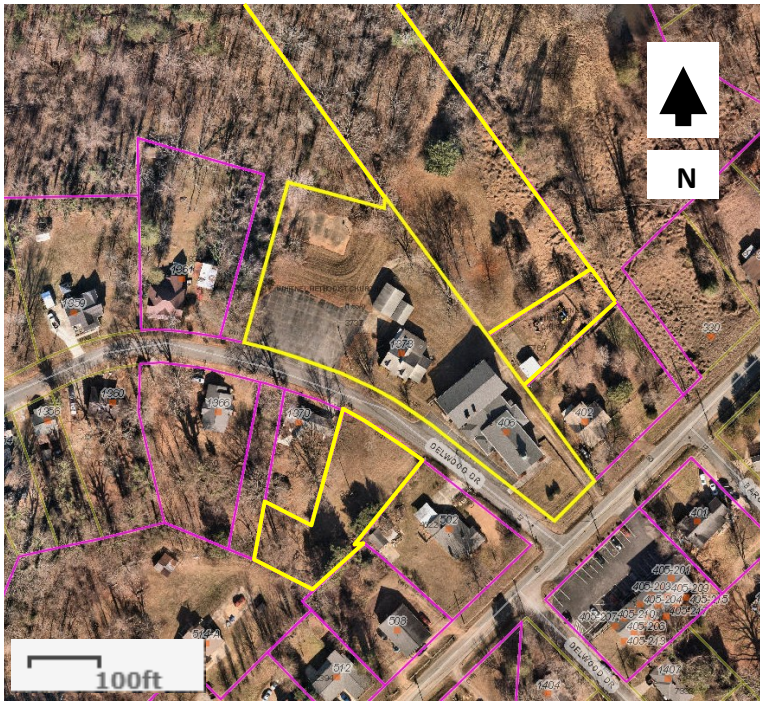
Staff Report

Special Use Permit

Case Number SUP #3-26

Location map/Aerial Photograph



1373 Delwood Drive

(Former Whitnel United Methodist Church)

Subject Property









Summary

Owner

The Board of Trustees Western NC Conference United Methodist Church Inc.

Applicant

John Steigerwald

Location

1373 Delwood Drive

NCPINs

2758173737, 2758174925, 2758175764, 2758173526

Project Planner

Hannah Williams, AICP, CZO

Matt Duchan, AICP, CZO

Updated November 3, 2026

Applicant's Request:

The applicant is requesting a Special Use Permit to operate an educational facility, North Carolina Girls Academy (NCGA), which includes academic classes, personal and professional development, and living quarters for students and staff.

Staff Recommendation:
Approval of the request.

Planning Board Recommendation:

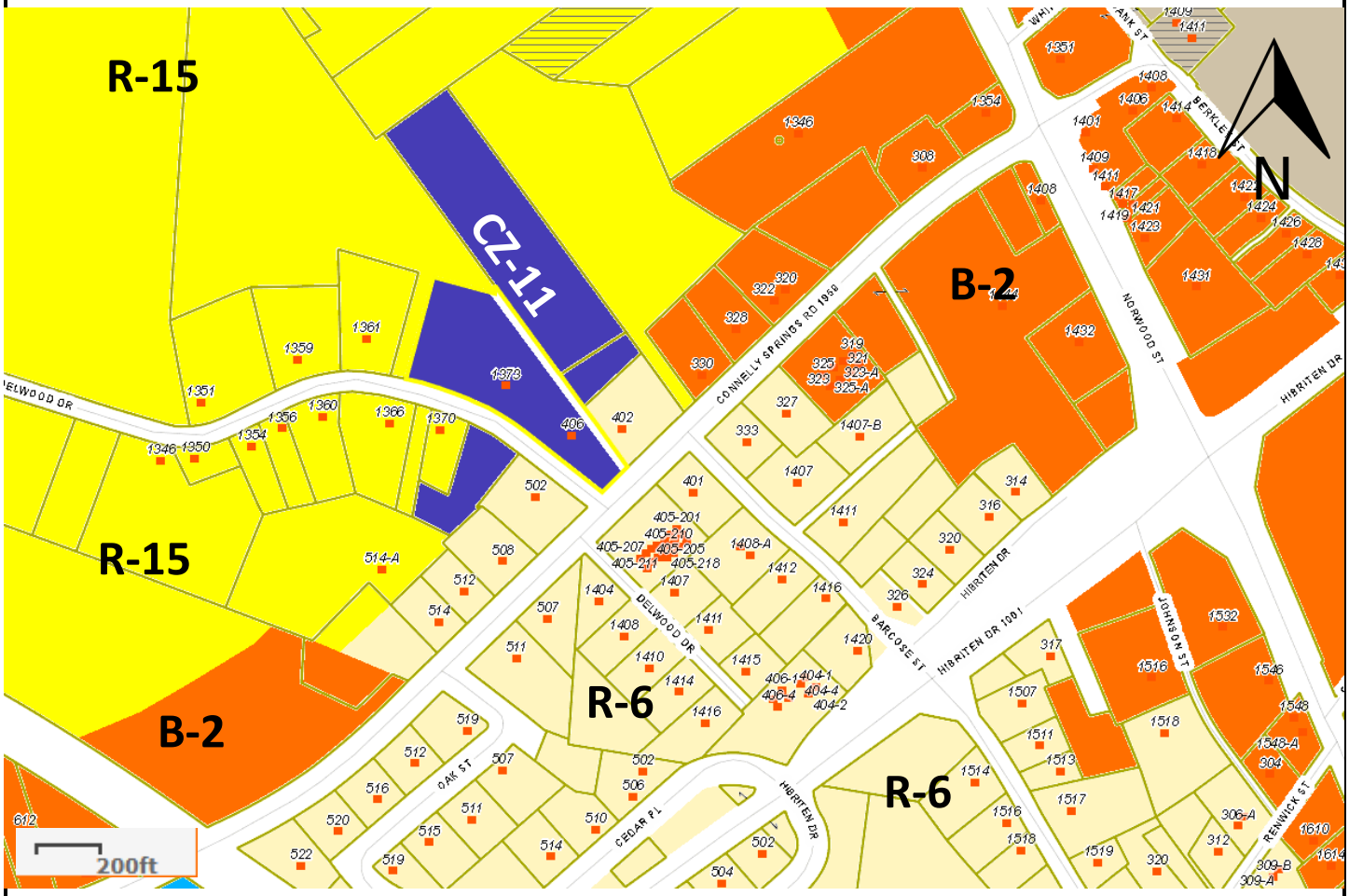
Public Comment:

Planning Board Meeting: Scheduled for November 9, 2026. Notices were mailed to adjacent property owners on October 28, 2026.

City Council (Public Hearing): Anticipated to be scheduled for December 1, 2026.

******This request is considered quasi-judicial. You should not discuss this case with decision makers outside of the scheduled public meeting******

ZONING MAP


R-15
CZ-11
B-2
R-15
B-2
R-6
R-6
CONNELLY SPRINGS RD 1958
DELWOOD DR
HIBRITEN DR
HIBRITEN DR 1001
BARCOSE ST
OAK ST
CEDAR PL
NORWOOD ST
JOHNSON ST
RENNICK ST
BERKLEY ST
200ft
N

BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS

Intent of Special Use Permits

Special uses are recognized in the zoning ordinance as uses which may be compatible with an area depending on the specific details of the project, its surroundings, and the level of services available to the site, but are not permitted "by right" in the zoning district. The special use permit process gives the City sufficient flexibility to determine whether a specific land use on a given site will be compatible with the environment and the Comprehensive Plan. Through the approval of a Special Use Permit, the Planning Board and City Council may set conditions or use limitations, thereby establishing a realm of acceptability for the particular use that will be neither arbitrary nor capricious, and will promote the spirit and character of the surrounding neighborhood. The process requires the Planning Board to review and make a recommendation to the City Council on the request. The City Council must then decide whether nor not to issue a Special Use Permit following a quasi-judicial hearing.

Intent of the Zoning District

Article V of the Lenoir Zoning Code states:

CZ-* (Conditional Zoning District) is intended for use in situations where conventional zoning standards are inadequate to facilitate a particular desirable development or to fully mitigate concerns over the impact of such a development. A Conditional Zoning district may be based on a conventional "base" zoning district, with additional conditions added that are reasonable and necessary to permit the proposed use and development of the property, or it may contain regulations that are completely unique to the district. Conditional Zoning districts are intended to achieve results equal to or better than would be permissible under an existing zoning district.

R - 6 Residential (Multi-family) District is intended to establish and preserve areas of land within the city for medium and high density residences, including single family, doublewide manufactured homes, duplexes, townhomes, multi-family developments, and other compatible uses at appropriate densities. Higher density multi-family developments are allowed as special uses. Any uses which would adversely affect or interfere with the residential character and development of these areas are excluded.

The CZ-11 ordinance (attached in Appendix B) was originally created to provide workforce housing, making dorm-style living a permitted use, since high-density group dwellings were not previously permitted by right on-site. The three buildings were assigned additional uses not permitted by-right in R-6 including high-density multifamily, group dwellings for 7 or more non-related residents, group dwellings for 1-6 non-related residents, cultural, community, and religious facilities, daycare centers, and event venues.

Subject and Surrounding Properties

The subject property consists of four parcels, totaling 4.17 acres, zoned CZ-11. The main parcel along Delwood Drive is 1.55 acres and consists of a sanctuary, a fellowship hall, and several classrooms. The northernmost parcel is 1.95 acres, zoned R-15, and is undeveloped. There are also several parking spaces along the parcel's frontage and a parking lot to the west of the buildings on-site. The parcel behind the church is .21 acres and features a playground, while the final parcel southwest of the church is .43 acres and undeveloped.

This property is in a primarily residential area. The properties to the south and west of the subject properties are zoned for single-family residential (R-15), while the properties to the immediate east of the property are zoned for high-density residential (R-6). There are multiple apartment complexes in the vicinity of the site. To the northeast towards the intersection of Connelly Springs Road and Norwood Street, properties are zoned for general business (B-2) along both Connelly Springs Road and Norwood Street. Most properties north along Norwood Street are single-family until Morganton Boulevard, while medium-density residential and business uses are more common along Norwood Street heading south towards the Joyceton area and the Town of Hudson.

Proposed Use

The applicant is seeking approval to establish an educational facility at the former Whitnel United Methodist church. The program is called North Carolina Girls Academy (NCGA) and is an expansion of similar operations carried out at North Carolina Boys Academy (NCBA). NCGA will provide supervised classroom instruction and preparation for further education and adult responsibilities.

BACKGROUND AND ANALYSIS (CONTINUED)

NCGA intends to use many of the established classrooms for the church as office space. The dorms in the hall next to the church will remain dorms as part of the boarding school program, but the first few students will live in the parsonage with designated staff until the school reaches enrollment capacity.

Consistency with the Comprehensive Plan

All decisions of the Planning Board and City Council should be based on consistency of the proposal with the comprehensive plan and any other officially adopted plan that is applicable. As of August 2026, educational facilities (private and public) are a special use in R-6 zoning, and is not identified as a permitted use in CZ-11. The City's Comprehensive Plan encourages reuse and redevelopment of vacant and historic buildings. Part of this process entails initiating zoning changes to encourage development and making the zoning code more practical and easier to understand. Revitalizing a historic property with a use such a school that helps to improve the lives of children and employs local staff is a legitimate means of revitalization.

FINDINGS

No Special Use Permit shall be approved unless the Planning Board and City Council find that:

1. The proposed special use will comply with all height, yard, lot and area requirements and other regulations of the district in which it is located unless otherwise specified. *The applicant states that the proposed use will comply with all applicable height, yard, lot, and area requirements and other regulations for the zoning district. The existing structures will be retained, no new structures are proposed and any necessary modifications will comply with applicable requirements.*

2. All driveways will be designed with respect to such matters as proper ingress and egress for automobiles in order to minimize traffic congestion and increase pedestrian safety and conveniences. *The applicant states that the property's existing driveways and spacious parking lot will support appropriate vehicle ingress and egress for the proposed use. NCGA will maintain access and circulation to minimize traffic congestion and promote pedestrian safety and convenience.*

3. Off-street parking and loading areas will be provided in compliance with the Zoning Ordinance. *The existing on-site parking lot is anticipated to accommodate the proposed educational use. NCGA will ensure that off-street parking complies with Section 1000 and that any required off-street loading complies with Section 1001 of Lenoir's Zoning Ordinance.*

4. The establishment of the special use will not hinder the normal and orderly development and improvement of surrounding property for uses already permitted in the district. *The applicant maintains that the proposed educational use will not hinder the normal and orderly development or improvement of surrounding properties from uses already permitted in the district. Aside from the educational facility, NCGA's overall plans align with the property's uses approved in March 2025.*

5. Any required screening and landscaping will be designed or planted with full consideration of the effectiveness of individual plant types, dimensions, and characteristics in minimizing the noise, glare, visual impacts and other economic effects on adjoining properties. *NCGA plans to improve the campus's landscaping and overall appearance. Any required landscaping will consider plant types, dimensions, characteristics, and placement to minimize noise, glare, visual impacts, and other adverse effects on adjoining properties.*

6. Any permitted signs and proposed exterior lighting will be designed to reduce glare and to mitigate any adverse effects of sign size and height; so as to make the signs aesthetically pleasing and compatible with adjoining properties. *The applicant does not intend to change existing exterior lighting or signage as part of this application. NCGA will ensure that lighting and permitted signs comply with applicable requirements. The applicant intends to use existing signage for auxiliary uses.*

7. The exterior architectural appearance and functional plan of any proposed building or structure will not vary greatly from any buildings or structures already construction or in the course of construction in the immediate vicinity or from the character of the applicable district, so as to cause a substantial depreciation in the property values of the immediate vicinity. *No changes to the exterior architectural appearance of the existing buildings are proposed as part of this educational special use request. NCGA plans to maintain and beautify the facilities while preserving their compatibility with the surrounding neighborhood and the character of the zoning district.*

8. The type, size, hours of operations, location of the use upon the site, and intensity of the proposed special use will not be harmful or annoying to surrounding properties. *The proposed educational use will serve residential students enrolled in the NCGA, with a planned program capacity of 16 students. Staffing will consist of seven team members: one program manager, three full-time staff members, and three part-time staff members. The daily schedule will begin at approximately 6:00 am with preparation for the day, and conclude in the evening following dinner and completion of daily responsibilities. Academic instruction is expected to conclude by noon, with the remainder of the day dedicated to structured enrichment and practical learning activities. Based on the anticipated enrollment, staffing levels, and daily operations, traffic associated with the proposed use is expected to be minimal.*

Staff Recommendations

Staff recommends approval of the requested Special Use Permit for the proposed educational facility, with the following conditions:

1. *Applicant must adhere to Section 714 Design Standards including but not limited to: architectural materials, elevations, and facades, parking, ingress and egress, lighting, and signage.*
2. *NCGA must follow the operational schedule as proposed. As the operations grow in terms of student enrollment and staff, NCGA must notify the city and coordinate with Caldwell County Building Inspections to ensure that all buildings and operations meet local, state, and federal codes.*

Planning Board Recommendations

Site Photos



Above: View of front of Church from Delwood



Above: Parsonage home

Below: Parking lot serving the Church property



Below: Grassy area at the rear of the church



APPENDIX A—APPLICANT'S RESPONSES

Criteria for SUP Approval - Teen Challenge North Carolina Adolescent Program - North Carolina Girls Academy (NCGA)

1. Compliance with district requirements

The proposed NCGA use will comply with all applicable height, yard, lot, and area requirements and other regulations for the zoning district. The existing structures will be retained, and any necessary modifications will comply with applicable requirements.

2. Driveways, traffic flow, and pedestrian safety

The property's existing driveways and spacious parking lot will support appropriate vehicle ingress and egress for the proposed use. NCGA will maintain access and circulation to minimize traffic congestion and promote pedestrian safety and convenience. See Attachment 1.

3. Off-street parking and loading

The existing on-site parking lot is anticipated to accommodate the proposed educational use. NCGA will ensure that off-street parking complies with Section 1000 and that any required off-street loading complies with Section 1001 of Lenoir's Zoning Ordinance.

4. Compatibility with surrounding development

The proposed educational use will not hinder the normal and orderly development or improvement of surrounding properties for uses already permitted in the district. NCGA's overall plans align with the property's uses approved in March 2025.

The educational component will serve only students enrolled in the NCGA program and will provide individualized instruction designed to maximize student learning. NCGA intends to follow the non-public school model used by North Carolina Boys Academy, with all applicable state requirements addressed before educational operations begin.

APPENDIX A—APPLICANT'S RESPONSES (CONTINUED)

5. Screening and landscaping

NCGA plans to improve the campus's landscaping and overall appearance. Any required screening or landscaping will consider plant types, dimensions, characteristics, and placement to minimize noise, glare, visual impacts, and other adverse effects on adjoining properties. See Attachment 2.

6. Signs and exterior lighting

No changes to existing exterior lighting or signage are proposed as part of this application. NCGA will ensure that lighting and permitted signs comply with applicable requirements. Any future changes will be designed to reduce glare, minimize adverse effects associated with sign size and height, and remain aesthetically pleasing and compatible with adjoining properties.

7. Architectural compatibility

No changes to the exterior architectural appearance of the existing buildings are proposed as part of this educational special use request. NCGA plans to maintain and beautify the facilities while preserving their compatibility with the surrounding neighborhood and the character of the zoning district.

8. Operational compatibility with neighboring properties

The proposed educational use will serve residential students enrolled in the North Carolina Girls Academy (NCGA), with a planned program capacity of 16 students. Staffing will consist of seven team members: one program manager, three full-time staff members, and three part-time staff members.

TCNCAP's administrative and operational support will include a business office, campus life director, executive director, special projects, and accounting functions.

The students' daily schedule will begin in the early morning hours, approximately 6:00 a.m., with preparation for the day, and conclude in the evening following dinner and completion of daily responsibilities. Academic instruction is expected to conclude by noon, with the remainder of the day dedicated to structured enrichment and practical learning activities, including food service, gardening, and equine-assisted therapy involving work with horses.

Based on the anticipated enrollment, staffing levels, and daily program operations, traffic associated with the proposed educational use is expected to be minimal.

APPENDIX B—CZ-11 ORDINANCE

SECTION 1. ZONING. After due notice and public hearing, and pursuant to Appendix A, Article XIV of the Lenoir City Code, and other relevant portions of the Lenoir City Code, the zoning designation for the Property is hereby changed from the R-15 and R-6 zoning districts to Conditional Zoning district on the City's Official Zoning Map (to be denoted as "CZ-11").

SECTION 2. OTHER DEVELOPMENT LAWS. Except as expressly provided otherwise by this ordinance, the CZ-11 zoning district remains subject to all applicable federal, state, and local laws, and nothing in this ordinance shall be construed to exempt the Property from the lawful authority or jurisdiction of any federal, state, or local agency.

SECTION 3. DEFAULT ZONING DISTRICT. Except as expressly provided otherwise by this ordinance, the Property shall be governed by the land development regulations of the R-6 zoning district.

SECTION 4. SPECIAL CONDITIONS. The Conditional Zoning district for the Property is subject to the following special conditions:

1. **Concept Plan.** Subject to any modifications expressly contained in the text of this ordinance, development and maintenance of the Property must be consistent with the concept plan attached to this ordinance as **Exhibit "B"** (hereinafter the "Concept Plan"). In the event of a conflict between the text of this ordinance and the Concept Plan, the text of this ordinance shall control. References in this ordnance to lots, parcels, buildings, phases, and other development features refer to such features as identified on the Concept Plan.
2. **Variances.** Zoning variances to the standards of the default zoning district not modified by this ordinance may be approved pursuant to the procedures set forth in Appendix A, Article XIII, Section 1312.1 of the Lenoir City Code.
3. **Modification.** The special conditions specific to the CZ-11 zoning district may only be modified by application for a zoning map amendment following the procedures outlined in Appendix A, Article VIII, Section 820 of the Lenoir City Code.
4. **Permitted Uses.** In addition to the uses allowed in the R-6 zoning district, the following additional uses are permitted:
    a. Building A: Low to High Density Multi-family, Group Dwelling for 7 or more non-related residents.
    b. Building B: Single Family Residential, Group Dwelling for 1-6 non-related residents.
    c. Building C: Cultural and Community Facilities, Churches, Synagogues, and Mosques, Day Care Center, Event Venue
        i. Event Venue shall be defined as a commercial establishment and associated grounds engaged in the hosting and production of pre-planned events like weddings, corporate parties, or reunions. Typical accessory uses include kitchens or meal preparation space, photography studios, facilities to accommodate live or recorded music, and on- and off-site parking.
    d. Undeveloped Lots: Lot D and Lot E have no additional permitted uses outside of the R-6 zoning district.
5. **Density.** Density of multi-family uses shall default to the R-6 zoning district. 7.2 du/acre is the density allowed by right, and 15 du/acre is the maximum density allowed with a Special Use Permit. For group

APPENDIX B—CZ-11 ORDINANCE (CONTINUED)

dwellings that have shared kitchen facilities and common areas, with either single occupancy or shared occupancy rooms, two (2) beds shall be considered one dwelling unit.

6. **Minimum Lot Size and Frontage.** Parcels on the affected lots shall maintain the minimum lot size as identified in the City of Lenoir Zoning Ordinance. There shall be no public roadway frontage for individually platted residential lots (townhomes, bungalow court, patio homes) as long as the parent tract for the residential development maintains a minimum frontage of 25 ft on a public road. If private roads and/or common space are developed in conjunction with platted lots, a homeowner's association must be established to provide for the ongoing maintenance of private roads and common space.
7. **Ingress and Egress.** The access point along Delwood Drive shall be maintained, and shall be available for use by the existing buildings as well as future development on the site. A secondary access point must be provided for any development containing 30 or more residential units, which may be a private driveway off of Connelly Springs Road or Delwood Drive. A cross-access easement shall be required for use by both the upland acreage and the existing building.
8. **Lighting.** All new and replacement light fixtures shall be fully cut-off and shielded so as to prevent light spill-over onto adjacent residential properties.
9. **Design.** All new non-residential, attached single family, and multi-family structures and developments on the subject property must meet the Design Standards for Commercial, Office, Institutional, and Government Buildings in Section 714 of the code of ordinances. When a substantial improvement is made to any existing structure, the pre-existing portions of the building and building site must be brought into compliance with these design standards. These standards include but are not limited to building materials, building facades, customer/resident entrances, architectural features, parking, sidewalk, and landscaping.
10. **Signage.** All development shall follow the sign standards for residential districts in Section 1108 of the sign ordinance. As needed, the developer of the property shall establish entrance signage to the group dwellings and other uses as development progresses that meet these standards.

SECTION 5. SEVERABILITY. If any provision of this ordinance or its application to any person or circumstance is held invalid, the invalidity does not affect other provisions or applications of this ordinance which can be given effect without the invalid provision or application, and to this end the provisions of this ordinance are severable.

SECTION 6. EFFECTIVE DATE. This ordinance takes effect upon adoption.

DONE, THE PUBLIC NOTICE, in a newspaper of general circulation in the City of Lenoir, North Carolina, by the City Clerk of the City of Lenoir, North Carolina, the 6th day of March and the 13th day of March, 2025.

DONE, THE PUBLIC HEARING, at a regular meeting, the 18th day of March, 2025.

DONE, ENACTED ON FINAL PASSAGE, by an affirmative vote of the a majority of a quorum present of the City Council of the City of Lenoir, North Carolina, at a regular meeting, this 18th day of March, 2025.