

**SPECIAL USE PERMIT-02-06. BUSCH GARDENS, WILLIAMSBURG – NEW FRANCE EXPANSION  
Staff Report for March 6, 2006 Planning Commission Meeting**

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*This staff report is prepared by the James City County Planning Division to provide information to the Planning Commission and Board of Supervisors to assist them in making a recommendation on this application. It may be useful to members of the general public interested in this application.*

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**PUBLIC HEARING**

Planning Commission:  
Board of Supervisors:

**Building F Board Room: County Government Complex**

March 6, 2006, 7:00 p.m.  
Scheduled for April 11, 2006, 7:00 p.m. (Height Waiver HW-01-06)

**SUMMARY FACTS**

Applicant: Ronnie Orsborne of LandMark Design Group

Land Owner: Busch Entertainment Corporation

Proposal: Busch Entertainment Corporation proposes to erect a queuing building and an embarking/disembarking station, collectively totaling approximately 7,500 square feet in size, and with additional auxiliary support buildings, as needed, to serve a new theme-park expansion in the New France area of Busch Gardens, Williamsburg, which will be laid out over a total area of approximately five acres. By creating an expansion of 5,000 square feet or more, this project requires a Special Use Permit, pursuant to Section 24-11(b)(2) of the Zoning Ordinance. A Height Limitation Waiver is separately being requested from the Board of Supervisors, pursuant to Section 24-419(c) of the Zoning Ordinance, to allow other portions of the expansion to exceed 60 feet in height above grade.

Location: 7851 Pocahontas Trail, Roberts District (Inside Busch Gardens Theme Park)

Tax Map / Parcel Nos.: (51-4) (1-9)

Parcel Size: Project will affect approximately 5 acres of a 381.71 acre parcel

Existing Zoning: M-1, Limited Business/Industrial

Proposed Zoning: (No change in zoning proposed.)

Comprehensive Plan: Limited Industry

Primary Service Area: Inside

Staff Contact: David W. German Phone: (757) 253-6685

**STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

Given that the proposed queuing building and embarking/disembarking station is intentionally planned for a location near the center of the Busch Gardens Theme Park, the Planning Division finds that the proposed structures will have minimal visual or audio impact to persons or properties outside the boundaries of the Busch Gardens property. The proposed use is in keeping with the tenets of both the Zoning District and Comprehensive Plan

designations and goals for the subject parcel on which the use is to be located. Planning Staff recommends that the Planning Commission approve this Special Use Permit Application.

### **PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

Mr. Ronnie Orsborne of LandMark Design Group has applied on behalf of Busch Entertainment Corporation for a Special Unit Permit to allow for the construction of a queuing building and an embarking/disembarking station, with additional auxiliary support buildings, as needed, to serve a new amusement attraction (“expansion”) in the New France area of the Busch Gardens, Williamsburg Theme Park. The new queuing building and embarking/disembarking station will collectively be approximately 7,500 square feet in area, and will serve the balance of the overall expansion, which will be laid out over an area of approximately five acres. The buildings will be constructed on-site of materials (wood, stucco, stone, etc.), and have a thematic appearance similar to other nearby structures in the theme park. The buildings are not expected to exceed forty feet in height at their highest points, and should not be visible from outside the theme park’s boundaries. Section 24-11(b)(2) of the Zoning Ordinance requires a Special Use Permit for any expansion collectively totaling 5,000 square feet or greater in commercial area. The proposal calls for the new buildings (and associated expansion) to be constructed near the center of the theme park near the northwest end of the Rhine River, and just north of the existing *Alpengeist* rollercoaster attraction. The new buildings and expansion will replace an attraction currently located in that vicinity.

It is envisioned that other parts of the proposed expansion not covered by this SUP will reach heights of up to 210’ over finished grade; these portions of the expansion are being separately addressed by the James City County Board of Supervisors, in response to the applicant’s separate Height Waiver Application (HW-01-06).

### **SURROUNDING ZONING AND DEVELOPMENT ANALYSIS**

To the west and southwest of Busch Gardens is Kingsmill, a residential subdivision zoned R-4, Residential Planned Community, and Carter’s Grove County Road, on land owned by the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation. To the north of the theme park is the Anheuser-Busch Brewery on land zoned M-2, General Industrial. To the northeast of the park are the Route 60 and Route-143 roadways, sections of rail line owned by CSX Railroad, and the Williamsburg Country Club and Golf Course. To the east and southeast of the theme park is Grove, which contains residentially zoned properties. Planning Staff believes that the proposed expansion places supporting buildings for a theme park attraction use into an existing theme park, on land properly zoned for such use, and, thus, finds the proposal to be compatible with surrounding land uses.

### **ACCESS AND TRAFFIC IMPACTS ANALYSIS**

This Special Use Permit (SUP) would not change any access into or out of Busch Gardens. The applicant has represented that the proposed buildings would, in and of themselves, likely have a minimal impact on the total amount of traffic that is generated by the theme park. The traffic impacts caused by this proposal would be minimal, excepting for a possible temporary increase in overall park attendance when the expansion first opens to the public.

### **COMPREHENSIVE PLAN ANALYSIS**

The 2003 James City County Comprehensive Plan designates the Busch Gardens property as Limited Industry. The Limited Industry designation is reserved for sites within the Primary Service Area that are used for warehousing, office space, service industries, light manufacturing plants, and public facilities that have moderate impacts on the surrounding area. In the consideration of acceptable land uses for Limited Industry areas, dust, noise, odor, and other adverse environmental effects, not size, are primary considerations.

An amusement park is a service industry, albeit not a traditional one. The park will not create dust or odor, and noise pollution is largely kept to a minimum by heavy vegetative screening along its perimeter. Because the proposed queuing building and embarking/disembarking station will be built near the center of the park, the audio and visual impact of these buildings will be minimal.

The Planning Staff analyzed the proposed SUP against the *Goals, Strategies and Actions* for Community Character areas found in the 2003 Comprehensive Plan of James City County. The proposed use does not contradict the *Goals* of the Community Character guidelines. The following Community Character *Strategies* were most closely applicable to this SUP application (as numbered in the Comprehensive Plan):

2.) Ensure that development is compatible in scale, size, and location to surrounding existing and planned development.

*Staff Comment:* The proposed queuing building and embarking/disembarking station will be located near the center of the Busch Gardens theme park, and will not have a discernable impact to locations beyond the park's boundaries.

3.) Ensure that development along community character Corridors and Areas protects the natural views of the area, promotes the historic, rural or unique character of the area, maintains greenbelt networks, and establishes entrance corridors that enhance the experience of residents and visitors.

*Staff Comment:* Due to the envisioned location for the queuing building and embarking/disembarking station, the impacts to the natural views, greenbelt networks, and entrance corridors of the area will be negligible. The applicant has indicated that the highest parts of the queuing building and embarking/disembarking station will not exceed forty feet in height, which will help to keep the structures screened from view from locations outside Busch Gardens. Further, this will help to maintain the natural tree line found in the Busch Gardens Park, which will help to protect the natural views of the area. Finally, the unique character of the area is somewhat defined by the presence of the Busch Gardens Theme Park, which this new proposal is intended to enhance.

6.) Ensure that all new development blends carefully with the topography and surrounding vegetation, preserving unique formations, greenery, and scenic views.

*Staff Comment:* The applicant has indicated that the queuing building and embarking/disembarking station will be well screened by the natural tree line of the Busch Gardens Park, which will help to preserve the scenic view corridors of the area. No unique formations will be disturbed by the construction of these buildings.

The following Community Character *Action* was most closely applicable to this SUP application (as numbered in the Comprehensive Plan):

24.) Maintain the small town, rural, and natural character of the County by:

b. Encouraging new developments to employ site and building design techniques that reduces their visual presence and scale. Design techniques include berms, buffers, and landscaping, building designs that appear as collections of smaller buildings rather than a single large building, building colors and siting that cause large structures to blend in with the natural landscape, and low visibility parking locations.

*Staff Comment:* Because the proposed expansion is located more than 1,800 feet from US Route 60 (Pocahontas Trail), the impact to the buffers and landscaping associated with this Community Character Corridor should be negligible. The proposed queuing building and embarking/disembarking station will be screened from view by the natural tree lines, plantings, and landscaping currently present in Busch Gardens. To help reduce the mass of the buildings involved, Busch Entertainment Group proposes to use four smaller buildings of specific function, rather than to combine all four functions into one larger building. Finally, the buildings will be made of materials that help them blend in with each other, existing buildings in the same area of the park, and with the natural and man-made landscaping of the immediate area. The character of the proposed buildings and their intended use is in keeping with those uses immediately adjoining them (the rest of Busch Gardens), and with the standards associated with properties zoned M-1, Limited Business/Industrial. This supports the General Land Use Standards found on

For these reasons, Planning Staff supports the proposed expansion, finding it to be consistent with the tenets of the Comprehensive Plan.

**RECOMMENDATION**

Given that the proposed queuing building and embarking/disembarking station is intentionally planned for a location near the center of the Busch Gardens Theme Park, the Planning Division finds that the proposed structures will have minimal visual or audio impact to persons or properties outside the boundaries of the Busch Gardens property. The proposed use is in keeping with the tenets of both the Zoning District and Comprehensive Plan designations and goals for the subject parcel on which the use is to be located. Planning Staff recommends that the Planning Commission approve this Special Use Permit Application. Planning Staff recommends that the Planning Commission approve this Special Use Permit Application, with the following Conditions:

1. **Permit:** This Special Use Permit shall be limited to the construction of a queuing building and embarking/disembarking station, totaling approximately 7,500 square feet in size, and with additional auxiliary support buildings, as needed, to serve the proposed new expansion in the New France area of Busch Gardens, Williamsburg, as represented by the applicant.
2. **Height:** No part of the queuing building, embarking/disembarking station, or auxiliary support buildings shall exceed approximately 40' in height over finished grade. The average finished grade at the site of the Expansion is represented by the applicant as being up to approximately 70' feet above sea level.
3. **Lighting:** A lighting plan shall be submitted to, and approved by, the Planning Director or his designee prior to the issuance of a final Certificate of Occupancy for any of the proposed buildings. The lighting plan shall show that no glare will be cast beyond the Busch Gardens property boundary line by any lighting installed as a component of or result of any of the proposed buildings. Further, the lighting plan shall prohibit any lights which direct light upward to illuminate any part of the proposed buildings or surrounding theme park areas.
4. **Commencement of Construction:** Construction on this project shall commence within 36 months from the date of approval of this special use permit or this special use permit shall be void. Construction shall be defined as the obtaining of permits for the construction of foundations and/or footings;
5. **Severance Clause:** This special use permit is not severable. Invalidation of any word, phrase, clause, sentence, or paragraph shall invalidate the remainder.

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David W. German

Attachments:

1. Location / Zoning Map