

Molly McGuire

From: Leslie Rubenstein <lilrubie@hotmail.com>
Sent: Monday, August 3, 2026 2:30 PM
To: Planning Commission; Alison Van Gorp; Deb Estrada; Council
Subject: Support for the SJCC Rezone and Future of Our Community

Dear Mercer Island Planning Committee and City Council,

I was born and raised on Mercer Island and am proud to still call it home. The Stroum Jewish Community Center (SJCC) has been an important part of Mercer Island for more than 50 years, and I strongly support the proposed zoning change that will allow the renovation and expansion of this aging facility.

I am what many would call a "lifer" at the SJCC. My connection to the J began when I was just a few months old. I attended preschool there, spent my summers at camp, became a camp counselor, and later worked in customer service, marketing, fitness, and now community programming. The SJCC has been woven into every stage of my life.

The impact of the J extends far beyond the building itself. My parents met many of their closest friends while I was in preschool there, and decades later those friendships remain some of the strongest in their lives. For many of us who do not have extended family nearby, the people we met at the J became our family.

Every day I see people of all ages—from infants just a few months old to adults in their 90s—coming through our doors. Children from across Mercer Island, whether they are members or not, participate in our swim lessons and gain lifesaving water safety skills. Many local teenagers get their very first job at the J. Adults come to exercise, connect with friends, and build community, while older adults find opportunities to learn, stay active, and combat isolation.

In my role with Fitness, I have had the privilege of watching lifelong friendships form. I have seen members support one another through illnesses, celebrate milestones together, and become like family. Those relationships exist because the SJCC provides a welcoming place where everyone belongs, regardless of their background.

In my Community Engagement role, I strive to create those same opportunities for adults and older adults. We offer educational programs, social events, cultural experiences, and opportunities for people to connect with others and enrich their lives. Unfortunately, our current facility limits what we are able to provide. We simply do not have the space to offer many of the programs our community wants and needs.

With an expanded and modernized facility, we could welcome more people, create innovative programming, and provide additional gathering spaces that strengthen our community. At a time when loneliness and social isolation are increasingly recognized as major public health concerns, community spaces like the SJCC are more important than ever. Creating opportunities for people to connect is not just my job—it is my passion. To fulfill that mission, we need a facility that is safe, accessible, and designed to serve today's community while preparing for future generations.

I also urge you to approve this zoning change without further delay. Every day this project is postponed, construction costs continue to rise due to increasing material and labor expenses. Delays mean fewer

resources can ultimately go toward serving the community and more time before we can offer expanded programs, improved accessibility, and new opportunities for Mercer Island residents. The sooner this project moves forward, the sooner we can begin providing the additional services and spaces our community deserves.

I am disappointed by some of the misinformation that has circulated regarding this project. While I understand that change can bring concerns, I wish more of our neighbors could see the positive impact this renovation will have—not only for the greater Mercer Island community, but for them as well. Approximately 30% of Mercer Island residents utilize the SJCC in some way, making it one of the community's most significant gathering places. The J is part of what makes Mercer Island such a special place to live.

This project is also designed to improve the experience for our neighbors. The renovation includes changes that will improve traffic flow and create a better overall environment for those who live nearby. Our staff already goes to great lengths to reduce neighborhood impacts, including parking off-site and being shuttled to the facility during busy events to minimize on-street parking.

I also hope the City will consider this application with the same standards applied to other community-serving organizations. Other facilities on Mercer Island have been granted zoning flexibility to meet the needs of the community. The SJCC deserves the same fair consideration. While concerns have been raised about occasional street parking near the J a handful of times each year, nearby recreational facilities regularly generate significantly more on-street parking during the summer months. We have consistently worked to mitigate our impacts and will continue to be good neighbors while expanding our ability to serve the community.

This proposal is not simply about expanding a building. It is about investing in children, families, older adults, health and wellness, education, and creating stronger connections within our community for generations to come.

I respectfully ask that you approve the zoning change as soon as possible so the SJCC can continue serving Mercer Island for the next 50 years and beyond.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Leslie Rubenstein

"Try to be a Rainbow in Someone Else's Cloud."