



Lorraine Cochran-Johnson

Chief Executive Officer

DeKalb County Zoning Board of Appeals

Department of Planning & Sustainability

178 Sams Street,
Decatur, GA 30030

Wednesday, June 10, 2026

Planning Department Staff Analysis



Juliana Njoku

Director

N7. Case No: A-26-1248096

Parcel ID(s): 18 079 02 004

Commission District 04 Super District 07

Applicant Matthew Keller
1102 Stewart Mill Road
Stone Mountain, GA 30087

Owner: Matthew Keller
1102 Stewart Mill Road
Stone Mountain, GA 30087

Project Name: Ramsden Lake - Campground Buffer Variance

Location: 1102 Stewart Mill Road, Stone Mountain, GA 30087

Requests: Variance request from Section 27-4.2.62 of the DeKalb County Zoning Ordinance to:

- Reduce the required campground transitional buffer from 200 feet to approximately 40 feet along portions of the north and east property lines;
- Reduce the required campground transitional buffer from 200 feet to approximately 100 feet along the southern property line; and

To Facilitate development of campsites/accommodations and accessory campground structures to support the existing commercial campground use in the R-100 (Residential Medium Lot-100) zoning district.

Staff Recommendation: Approval with Conditions

Conditions: See Page 3

STAFF FINDINGS:

The applicant requests a variance to reduce the required 200-foot campground transitional buffer for Ramsden Lake, an existing commercial campground/glamping use at 1102 Stewart Mill Road. The subject property contains approximately 47.51 acres and is zoned R-100 (Residential Medium Lot-100). The submitted materials identify existing campground accommodations, a current operations building, proposed additional accommodations/campsites, a proposed operations/accessory building, a community building/prep room/camp store/bathrooms, gravel drive improvements, and related site improvements.

The submitted site plans show the required 200-foot buffer extending into substantial portions of the property. The applicant requests reduced buffer distances of approximately 40 feet along portions of the north and east property lines and approximately 100 feet along the southern property line. The submitted materials also indicate that an 8-foot privacy fence in the process of construction along residentially adjacent portions of the site and that existing natural berms, wooded areas, and topography provide additional separation.

1. There is an extraordinary or exceptional physical condition(s) pertaining to the particular piece of property (such as, but not limited to, lot size, lot shape, specimen tree(s), steep slope(s), or preservation of historic characteristics of the property), which was not created by the current owner, previous owner, or applicant; by reason of a clearly demonstrable condition(s), the strict application of the requirements of this chapter would deprive the property owner of rights and privileges enjoyed by other property owners in the same zoning district, as distinguished from a special privilege or convenience sought by the property owner.

The subject property is a large but irregularly configured parcel containing Ramsden Lake, which occupies a substantial central portion of the site. The property also contains topographic variation, wooded areas, natural berms, and existing internal access patterns. These physical conditions affect where campground accommodations, accessory structures, emergency access, and support facilities can be placed without unnecessarily concentrating improvements around the lake or disturbing existing natural areas.

Strict application of the 200-foot campground transitional buffer would significantly limit the use of the north, northeast, east, and southern portions of the property. Although the property contains 47.51 acres overall, the combination of the lake, irregular lot shape, topography, and required buffer creates a much smaller practical development area. Staff finds that the property contains exceptional physical and site conditions that support consideration of variance relief.

2. The requested variance does not go beyond the minimum necessary to afford relief, and does not constitute a grant of special privilege inconsistent with the limitations upon other properties in the zoning district in which the subject property is located:

The request is not a complete waiver of the campground transitional buffer. Instead, the applicant proposes different reduced buffer distances based on the location of proposed improvements and the physical conditions along each property edge. The submitted plans show a reduced buffer of approximately 40 feet along portions of the north and east property lines and a larger reduced buffer of approximately 100 feet along the southern property line.

Staff acknowledges that the requested 40-foot buffer is a substantial reduction from the 200-foot requirement. However, the relief is tied to a specific low-density campground layout on a large, constrained property. The submitted materials also indicate that the existing operations building is approximately 15 feet from the eastern property line, while the proposed operations/accessory building would be approximately 40 feet from the property line, increasing separation for that support use compared with the existing condition.

Staff finds that the requested variance is supportable as the minimum necessary only if it is limited to the submitted site plan and conditioned to preserve screening, require the proposed privacy fence, and prevent additional unreviewed encroachments into the required buffer. With those conditions, the request does not appear to constitute a special privilege inconsistent with the limitations on other properties in the zoning district.

3. The grant of the variance will not be materially detrimental to the public welfare or injurious to the property or improvements in the zoning district in which the subject property is located:

The proposed improvements are associated with the continued operation and limited expansion of an existing campground use previously reviewed through the SLUP process. Potential impacts from the reduced buffer include privacy, visual proximity, noise, lighting, and campground activity near residentially zoned property. The submitted materials attempt to address these concerns through natural separation, wooded areas, berms, distributed site layout, and an 8-foot privacy fence along residentially adjacent portions of the property.

The record also includes multiple letters of support from nearby residents indicating that they reviewed the proposed plans and support the requested reduction of the 200-foot buffer. Staff gives weight to those letters because the buffer requirement is intended primarily to mitigate impacts on surrounding properties. The submitted site plan also places the proposed improvements in a manner that appears to maintain substantial open space and avoids a more intensive development pattern.

Based on the submitted site plan, proposed privacy fence, existing natural screening, large site area, and letters of support, staff finds that the variance would not be materially detrimental to public welfare or injurious to surrounding properties, provided the approval is limited to the submitted plan and conditioned to maintain screening and buffering measures.

4. The literal interpretation and strict application of the applicable provisions or requirements of this chapter would cause undue and unnecessary hardship:

Strict application of the 200-foot campground transitional buffer would substantially reduce the usable portions of the property for the existing campground use. The applicant states that the buffer would render significant portions of the parcel unusable and would undermine the ability to implement site improvements needed for the long-term operation of the campground. Because the lake occupies much of the central portion of the property, strict enforcement of the buffer could also push improvements toward constrained or environmentally sensitive areas.

The hardship is not based solely on project cost, business preference, or convenience. Rather, it arises from the interaction between the ordinance requirement and the property's physical conditions, including the lake, irregular lot configuration, wooded and topographic features, and existing campground layout. Staff finds that literal interpretation and strict application of the 200-foot buffer would cause undue and unnecessary hardship in this case.

5. The requested variance would be consistent with the spirit and purpose of this Chapter and the DeKalb County Comprehensive Plan Text:

The purpose of the campground transitional buffer is to ensure appropriate separation between campground activity and surrounding residential properties. The requested variance reduces the numerical buffer distance, but the submitted materials show that the applicant proposes to maintain separation through a combination of reduced setbacks, natural berms, wooded screening, an 8-foot privacy fence, and a low-density site layout.

The property is located within the Suburban (SUB) Character Area. The previously reviewed SLUP materials for this site found that the campground use supports the SUB Character Area by balancing residential development with recreational services and allowing development to be designed in a way that preserves and enhances existing green space. The proposed variance would allow the existing recreation-oriented campground use to continue and expand while preserving substantial open space and the natural character of the site.

With conditions requiring substantial conformance to the submitted site plan, installation and maintenance of the proposed privacy fence, preservation of natural screening where practicable, and compliance with all applicable development standards, staff finds that the requested variance is consistent with the spirit and purpose of the zoning ordinance and the DeKalb County Comprehensive Plan.

FINAL STAFF ANALYSIS:

The applicant requests a variance from Section 27-4.2.62 to reduce the required 200-foot campground transitional buffer to approximately 40 feet along portions of the north and east property lines and approximately 100 feet along the southern property line to facilitate development of campsites/accommodations and accessory campground structures for Ramsden Lake at 1102 Stewart Mill Road.

The subject property contains approximately 47.51 acres and includes a large lake, irregular property boundaries, topographic variation, wooded areas, natural berms, and existing campground improvements. These conditions limit the practical placement of additional campground accommodations and accessory support structures. Strict application of the 200-foot buffer would substantially reduce the usable area of the property and could concentrate future improvements closer to the lake or other constrained portions of the site.

Staff finds that the requested variance is supportable because the property contains site-specific physical constraints, the relief is tied to a submitted low-density campground layout, and the record includes nearby letters of support. Staff also finds that the request should be conditioned to ensure that the reduced buffer does not authorize broader future encroachment into the required buffer area without additional review. The recommended conditions limit the variance to the submitted site plan, require the proposed privacy fence, preserve existing natural screening to the maximum extent practicable, and require compliance with all applicable development, stormwater, fire access, building, sanitation, and environmental standards.

Therefore, staff recommends approval with conditions of the requested variance from Section 27-4.2.62 of the DeKalb County Zoning Ordinance.

Staff Recommendation: Approval with Conditions

Recommended Conditions:

1. The following information about this variance shall be noted on any site plan prepared for the subject property: case number, approval date, type of variance, and conditions of approval.
2. The variance shall be limited to the campground transitional buffer reductions shown on the site plan submitted with the application, including a minimum buffer of approximately 40 feet along portions of the north and east property lines and approximately 100 feet along the southern property line.
3. Development authorized by this variance shall be substantially consistent with the site plan submitted with the application. Any additional campsites, accommodations, accessory structures, or campground-related improvements not shown on the submitted site plan and requiring further encroachment into the required 200-foot buffer shall require separate review and approval as applicable.
4. The 8-foot privacy fence shown along residentially adjacent portions of the site shall be installed and maintained prior to the use or occupancy of any new campground accommodations or accessory structures located within the reduced buffer area.
5. Existing natural berms, vegetation, and wooded screening within the reduced buffer areas shall be preserved to the maximum extent practicable, except where removal is necessary for approved access, utilities, stormwater, fire access, life-safety improvements, or construction shown on the approved site plan.
6. Nothing in this variance shall be interpreted to authorize any use, number of campground sites/accommodations, or site improvement beyond what is permitted by the approved SLUP, zoning ordinance, or other applicable county approvals.
7. The applicant shall comply with all applicable zoning, land disturbance, stormwater, fire access, building permit, sanitation, and environmental requirements prior to issuance of any permits or approvals for the proposed improvements.

DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING & SUSTAINABILITY

Chief of Executive Officer
Lorraine Cochran-Johnson

Director
Juliana A. Njoku

ZONING BOARD OF APPEALS (ZBA) APPLICATION

to Amend the Official Zoning Map of DeKalb County, Georgia

Subject Property Address: 1102 Stewart Mill Rd

City: Stone Mountain State: GA Zip: 30087

Parcel ID Number(s): 18 079 02 004 Acreage: 47.51

District: _____ Land Lot: _____ Block: _____ Parcel: _____

Commission District(s): 4 Super District: 7

Type of Hearing Requested (check one):

- VARIANCE (from Development Standards causing undue hardship upon owners of property.)
- SPECIAL EXCEPTIONS (to Reduce or Waive off-street parking or loading space requirements.)
- OFFICIAL APPEAL OF ADMINISTRATIVE DECISIONS.

***PLEASE REVIEW THE FILING GUIDELINES ON PAGE 4.**

FAILURE TO FOLLOW GUIDELINES MAY RESULT IN SCHEDULING DELAYS.*

I hereby authorize the staff of the Planning and Sustainable Department to inspect the property that is the subject of this application.

Owner Agent


Signature

04/14/26
Date

ZONING BOARD OF APPEALS (ZBA) APPLICATION FEE:
\$300.00

**DeKalb County does not require payment by wire transfer.
Be aware of scammers and fraudulent emails.**

Email plansustain@dekalbcountyga.gov with any questions



DEPARTMENT OF PLANNING & SUSTAINABILITY

ZONING BOARD OF APPEALS APPLICATION

AUTHORIZATION OF THE PROPERTY OWNER

I hereby authorize the staff and members of the Zoning Board of Appeals to inspect the premises of the Subject Property.

I hereby certify that the information provided in the application is true and correct.

I hereby certify that I am the owner of the property subject to the application.

DATE: 07/14/26

Applicant Signature: 

DATE: 07/14/26

Applicant Signature: 

Subject: Variance Request – Reduction of 200-Foot Buffer (Section 27-4.2.62, Commercial Campground SLUP)

Dear Members of the Zoning Board of Appeals,

My name is Matthew Keller, and I am writing to formally request a variance from Section 27-4.2.62 of the DeKalb County Zoning Ordinance. Specifically, we seek a reduction of the required 200-foot setback to 40 feet along the north and east property lines and 100 feet along the southern border of our property at 1102 Stewart Mill Road, Stone Mountain, GA 30087.

This request supports the thoughtful and sustainable expansion of **Ramsden Lake**, a Commercial Campground operating under the SLUP designation. The proposed improvements include approximately 10–13 additional accommodations, an operations building, and a small pavilion area. My wife and I have lived in DeKalb County since 2008 and have been navigating the zoning and permitting process for Ramsden Lake Glamping Resort since 2021. We currently operate 12 accommodations and a temporary operations building. This variance is one of the final steps required to complete needed improvements that ensure the long-term viability and responsible operation of the property while preserving its natural integrity.

Ramsden Lake is designed as a peaceful, nature-centered retreat where guests can rest and reconnect. The property maintains consistently high guest satisfaction, reflected in **228 Google reviews averaging 4.9 stars** and over **1,000 verified Airbnb guest reviews averaging 4.97 stars**, many from DeKalb County residents.

1. Physical Conditions of the Site

Unique physical conditions make strict compliance with the 200-foot setback impractical. The parcel is narrow and irregularly shaped, with the lake occupying much of its core. Along the northeastern border, the 200-foot buffer would render portions of the property unusable. The north, northeast, and south property lines already feature natural berms providing visual separation, and we are actively installing an 8-foot privacy fence near residential areas. Additionally, the northern and northeastern borders adjoin large parcels of 10–20 acres, not small residential lots. These constraints are inherent to the property and not the result of any actions by current or previous owners.

2. Minimum Variance Necessary

The requested reduction represents the **minimum variance necessary** to achieve functional use of the site while maintaining its character and open space. The proposed setbacks permit thoughtful placement of structures in areas that avoid specimen trees and preserve natural landscapes, consistent with the intent of the Commercial Campground SLUP. This results in a low-density, nature-based layout rather than any form of intensive development.

3. Public Welfare

The proposed improvements will generate a **net positive community impact**. We have received letters of support from adjacent property owners, who appreciate Ramsden Lake's preservation of green space and its positive contribution to the neighborhood's aesthetic. This project enhances the local environment, promotes eco-tourism, and upholds the scenic and ecological character of the area.

4. Ordinance Hardship

Strict enforcement of the 200-foot buffer would create an unnecessary hardship by rendering large portions of the parcel unusable, severely limiting the site's design flexibility, and undermining the intent of the Commercial Campground zoning designation. Without the variance, the remaining land area could only be developed in ways contrary to both our sustainability principles and the spirit of the ordinance.

5. Alignment with the Spirit of the Law

We fully respect the purpose of the buffer requirement—ensuring privacy and appropriate separation between campgrounds and nearby residential properties. Our proposal **meets that goal** through existing natural berms, an 8-foot privacy fence, and preserved vegetation, maintaining meaningful visual screening while allowing for reasonable and balanced property use. We are committed to continued stewardship of the land and to operating in harmony with the surrounding community.

In conclusion, we respectfully request your **approval of this variance** to allow Ramsden Lake to continue operating responsibly, sustainably, and in alignment with DeKalb County's goals for thoughtful land use and community enrichment. We genuinely appreciate your time, attention, and consideration.

Warm regards,
Matthew and Blaine Keller
Owners, Ramsden Lake
www.ramsdenlake.com
April 8, 2026

Handwritten signatures of Matthew and Blaine Keller. The signature for Matthew Keller is on top, and the signature for Blaine Keller is below it. Both are written in black ink.

Date: 4/14/2026

Dear Dekalb County Variance Board,

I Jonya Williams-Smoke owner and resident at property
791 Deer Run Dr. Stone have seen and discussed the
below plans with the owners of Ramsden Lake and as a neighbor are in support and
approval of their variance request to reduce the 200 foot buffer as seen below.

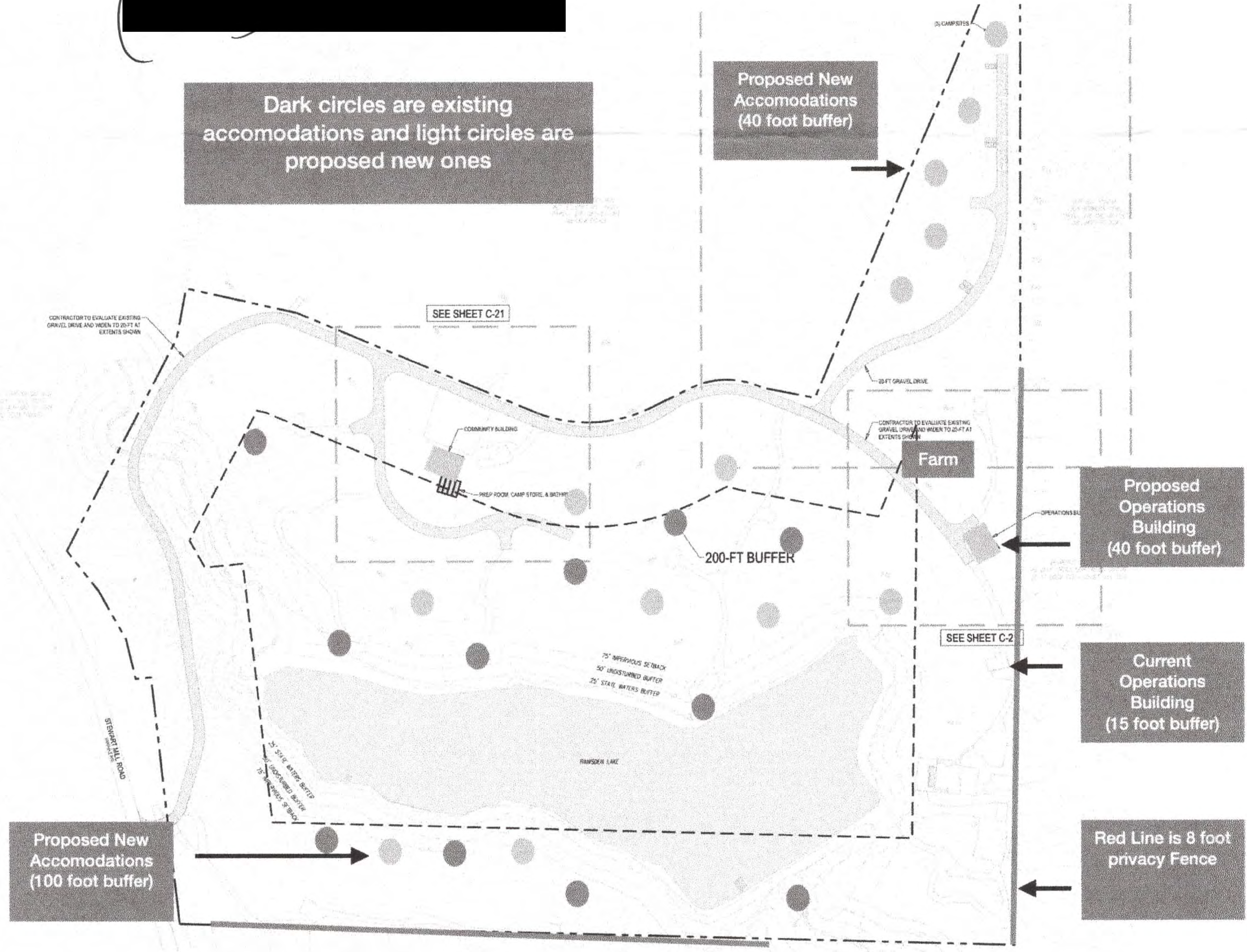
Sincerely yours,

Name: Jonya Williams-Smoke

Signature: [Handwritten Signature]

Contact phone & email: [Redacted]

[Redacted]



Date: 4-14-2026

Dear Dekalb County Variance Board,

I Ben Kight owner and resident at property [redacted] Bermuda Road have seen and discussed the below plans with the owners of Ramsden Lake and as a neighbor are in support and approval of their variance request to reduce the 200 foot buffer as seen below.

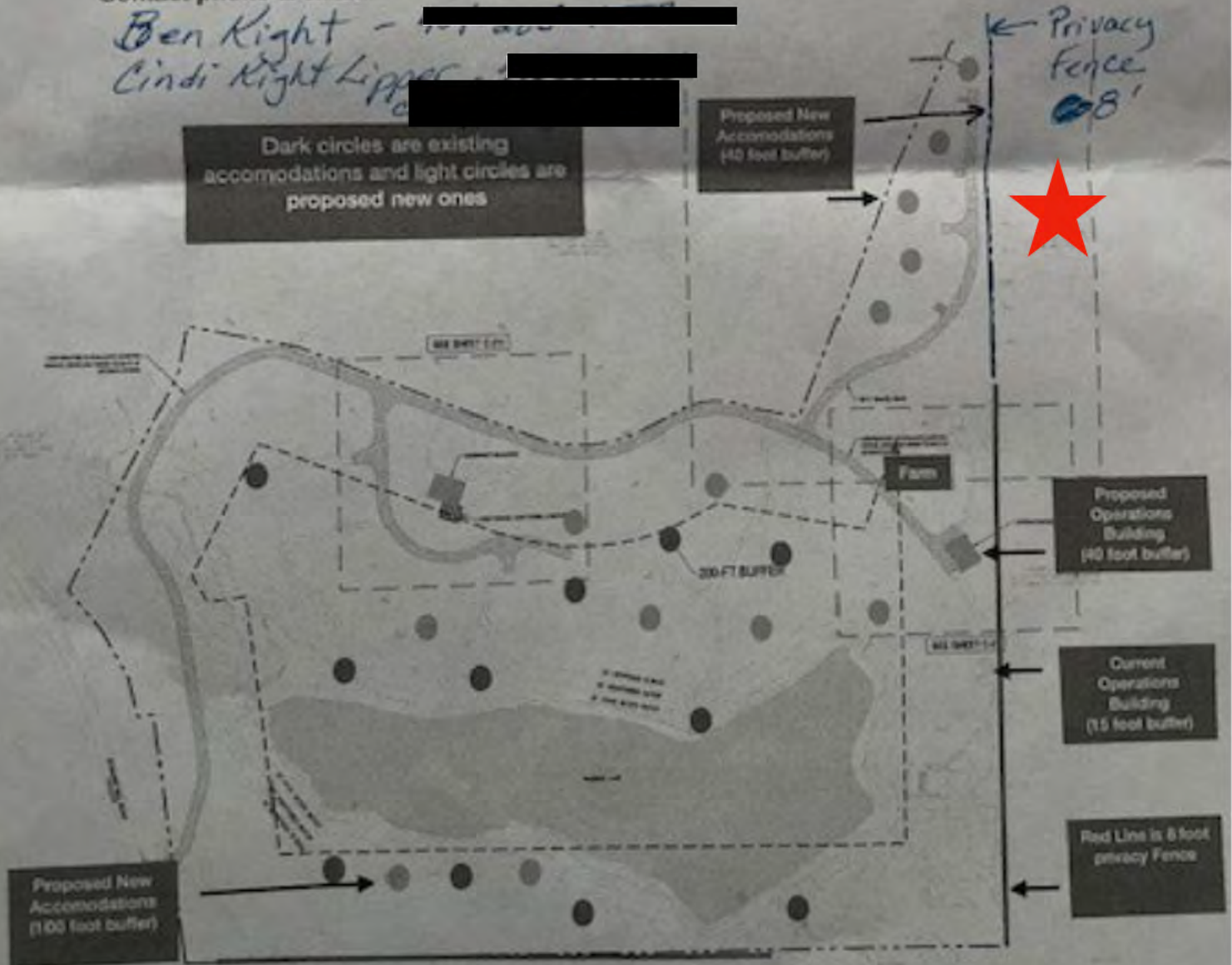
Sincerely yours,

Name: Ben Kight

Signature: [Signature]

Contact phone & email:

Ben Kight - [redacted]
Cindi Kight Lipper - [redacted]



Date: May 12, 2026

Dear Dekalb County Variance Board,

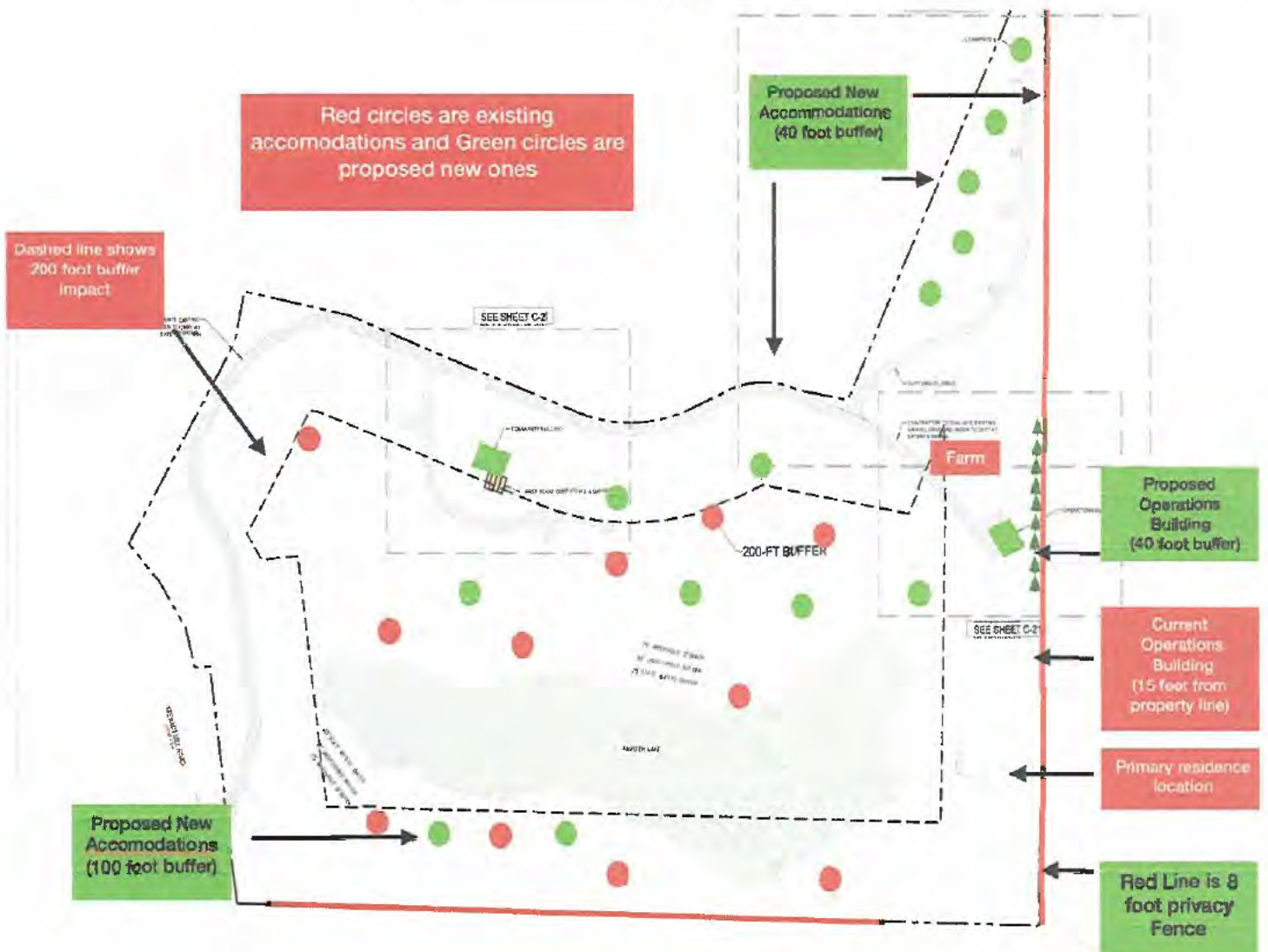
I Terence McDonald owner and resident at property [REDACTED] Pine Bark Rd, Stone Mountain GA 30087 have seen and discussed the below plans with the owners of Ramsden Lake and as a neighbor are in support and approval of their variance request to reduce the 200 foot buffer as seen below.

Sincerely yours,

Name: Terence McDonald

Signature: McDonald

Contact phone & email: [REDACTED]



Date: 04/14/26

Dear Dekalb County Variance Board,

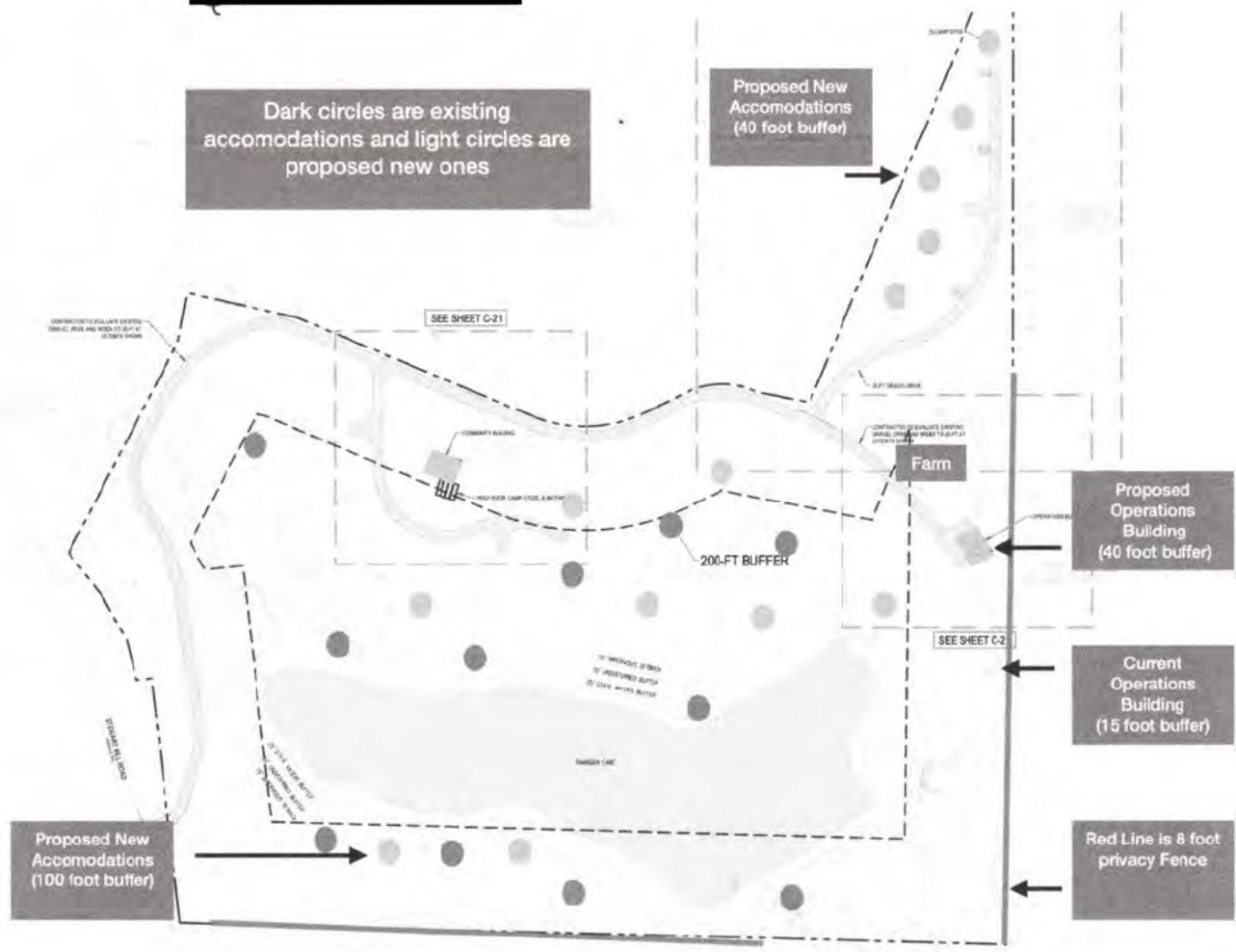
I Shameica Jones ^(center) owner and resident at property [redacted] Pine Valley Trace have seen and discussed the below plans with the owners of Ramsden Lake and as a neighbor are in support and approval of their variance request to reduce the 200 foot buffer as seen below.

Sincerely yours,

Name: Shameica Jones

Signature: S Jones

Contact phone & email: [redacted]



Date: 4/13/2026

Dear Dekalb County Variance Board,

I John Pearson owner and resident at property Deer Run Drive Stone Mountain have seen and discussed the below plans with the owners of Ramsden Lake and as a neighbor are in support and approval of their variance request to reduce the 200 foot buffer as seen below.

Sincerely yours,

Name: John Pearson

Signature: [Handwritten Signature]

Contact phone & email: [Redacted]

