

**Application to the Town of Elmira for Bhakti Marga America Campus Renovation**  
**1100 West First Street, 301 Demarest Parkway, & 304 Demarest Parkway**

Revised June 20, 2025

**1) Statement of Purpose and Project Objectives**

- a) Bhakti Marga America is a registered 501(c)(3) nonprofit religious organization, whose mission is to provide individuals with a structured path of Bhakti Yoga (the yoga of devotion) through meditation, prayer, and selfless service. This facility as a Hindu religious and community campus will serve as a hub for devotional practices, educational programs, and community outreach initiatives, in alignment with our mission.
- b) Currently the existing Temple and Ashram (formerly Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church and Convent) are legally occupied in accordance with Town of Elmira Zoning Laws (see Zoning considerations below). This application is being submitted for prerequisite zoning approval in anticipation of our request for Site Plan Approval and application for a building permit to renovate the former Our Lady of Lourdes Elementary School into a Hindu religious and community center.
- c) The Paranitya Narasimha Temple, located on this campus, is a well-recognized religious landmark in the global Hindu community. Its significance was highlighted by a mention from the Prime Minister of India following the temple's inauguration in September 2024. The temple has already contributed to a boost in local economic activity and is becoming a pilgrimage site for international visitors.

**2) Site Overview and Master Plan (Proposed Site Plan attached)**

- a) The Properties listed below are being merged into a single property. The property merger application and fee has been filed with the assessor. We are waiting for the paperwork to be processed and new Tax # to be assigned
- b) Owner's property, buildings and their uses
  - i) **Tax # 98.08-4-70 and Tax # 98.08-3-19: Bhakti Marga Paranitya Narasimha Temple** and parking, 1100 W. Church St., Elmira, NY 14905. Formerly Our Lady of Lourdes Catholic Church.
  - ii) **Tax # 98.08-4-71.1 and Tax # 98.08-4-71.2 (merged): Bhakti Marga Paranitya Narasimha Community Center** and parking, 301 Demarest Parkway, Elmira, NY 14905. Formerly Our Lady of Lourdes Elementary School
  - iii) **Tax # 98.08-4-24: Bhakti Marga Paranitya Narasimha Ashram** and parking, 304 Demarest Pkwy., Elmira, NY 14905. Formerly Our Lady of Lourdes Convent.

**3) Community Center Renovation Project**

- a) The building being proposed for re-use as the Bhakti Marga Paranitya Narasimha Community Center was the former Our Lady of Lourdes Elementary School. The 28,509 square foot gray stone and stucco building opened in 1957. The elementary school closed in 2010. The building was briefly considered for the location for the Finn Academy, Elmira Charter School and has also been used as a fitness center. The building, along with the

other properties which comprise the campus was purchased by Bhakti Marga America in January of 2022.

b) Community center functions & program areas (see proposed floor plan attached)

The renovated community center will accommodate various religious, educational, and community-focused activities, serving both our members and the broader public. The following outlines the intended use of each space:

- i) Auditorium: The current gymnasium will be repurposed into an auditorium to host religious gatherings, guided meditations, kirtan (devotional singing), lectures, workshops, and cultural programs. It will also be used for special events such as seasonal festivals, guest speakers, and interfaith dialogues. Events will be scheduled in accordance with the Hindu religious calendar.
- ii) Cafeteria & Kitchen: The cafeteria will provide vegetarian meals for guests, residents, and volunteers, in accordance with our religious dietary practices. The kitchen will support daily meal preparation for those staying on-site and will also facilitate food service for larger gatherings and occasional community outreach programs (e.g., food donation initiatives). Additionally, the cafeteria will include a patio deck along the southern facade, wrapping around the southeastern corner and extending to the eastern facade, allowing for additional outdoor seating and community engagement.
- iii) Shop: The campus will feature a small shop offering religious books, devotional items, incense, clothing, and ethically sourced products that align with Bhakti Marga's mission. It will be open to visitors during campus hours and will primarily serve event attendees.
- iv) Guest Accommodations (22+ Rooms): The existing building will initially offer 22 guest rooms for visiting monks, teachers, program participants, retreats, and volunteers engaged in religious programs or seva (selfless service). However, we are also considering the option of increasing the number of guest rooms by constructing an additional level on top of the existing building alongside Demarest Parkway.

c) Project Phases

The Community Center building project will be completed in several phases as outlined below:

- i) Phase I: The first building phase will include the cafeteria indoor and outdoor seating areas, renovations of the entrances, new toilet rooms including 2 accessible toilet rooms, the shop, reception office and meeting/classroom.
- ii) Future Phases will renovate the auditorium, build additional space for a kitchen and various auditorium support spaces, and renovate the existing classroom wing of the building as guest rooms

#### d) Compliance & Safety Measures

Bhakti Marga America is committed to ensuring that all renovations comply with building codes, fire safety regulations, and accessibility requirements. This includes but is not limited to:

- i) Necessary structural modifications to repurpose existing spaces while maintaining the integrity of the building.
- ii) Implementation of fire safety systems, emergency exits, and security measures to ensure a safe environment for all visitors. This will include installation of a sprinkler system throughout the entire building.
- iii) Accessible spaces, toilet rooms and parking and accessible routes to all public buildings.

#### 4) Bhakti Marga Campus and Community Center activities

It is important to note that all of the events and activities listed below have occurred during our past two and one-half years of operation, and no new programs or event types are being added as part of the community center renovation. The upgraded center simply allows us to better host and serve the needs of our existing religious community.

- a) Regular events such as Friday evening kirtan, Sunday morning prayers, occasional lectures, meditation courses, art workshops, and educational video screenings are all conducted on a small scale, typically drawing modest local attendance.
- b) Other periodic events and gatherings at the campus will be scheduled according to the Hindu religious calendar. Major annual festivals celebrated include Shivaratri, Narasimha Chaturdashi, Krishna Janmashtami, Navaratri (Autumn), and the anniversary of the Paranyta Narasimha Temple (September 3rd). These events are open to the public and have historically drawn up to 150 participants.
- c) Once per year, we also plan to host a four-day meditation retreat with an anticipated attendance of around 400 participants. In addition, we hold Darshan blessing events during visits from our spiritual leader, Paramahansa Vishwananda, which can attract between 500 to 1,000 attendees.

#### 5) Community & Traffic Considerations

We recognize the importance of minimizing traffic impact and maintaining a peaceful coexistence with the surrounding community. To that end:

- a) Parking estimates are based on the most extensive use cases, not regular daily activity. Our existing parking spaces are more than sufficient for all regular and most special events. During occasions where higher capacity is required (such as Darshan blessings), we coordinate overflow parking along W Church Street and provide a shuttle service to additional nearby parking areas. For example, during the Temple Inauguration in September 2023, we utilized the parking lot at Hendy Avenue Elementary School.

- b) Sound amplification will be used only in designated event spaces, and outdoor activities will adhere to reasonable noise limits to ensure respect for neighboring properties.
- c) The facility will continue offering community educational events and outreach programs, fostering positive relationships with the broader community.

## 6) Zoning Considerations

- a) **Determination that the Bhakti Marga Campus as a whole is a Place of Worship:** We are requesting approval of the current project and master plan, including the Temple, Community Center and Ashram, as a permitted use subject to site plan approval in the AAA-Residential Zoning district. At the suggestion of the Zoning Board, the Owner is consolidating all the separate tax parcels comprising the Campus. The Temple at 1100 W. Church St. is the primary use and the Ashram at 304 Demarest Pkwy. And the Community Center at 301 Demarest Pkwy. are accessory to the main use which is a place of worship. Addressing the individual parcels of the campus:
  - i) We concur with the determination of the Town of Elmira Zoning Officer that the property at 1100 W. Church St. (Tax ID 98.08-4-70), designated as the Temple is a place of worship, permitted in AAA residential zone with Site Plan Approval. We request ratification of that determination by the Zoning Board.
  - ii) We are appealing the determination by Town of Elmira Zoning Officer that the property at 304 Demarest Pkwy. (Tax ID 98.08-4-24), designated as the Ashram is a residential dormitory and a pre-existing non-conforming use. An ashram, like a monastery or convent, is a dedicated spiritual community where individuals renounce worldly pursuits to live a life of devotion, discipline, and worship. Both serve as sanctuaries for religious practice, contemplation, and guidance under a spiritual teacher or tradition. As such, they are rightly considered places of worship, where the central focus is the pursuit of the divine. Upon consolidation of the properties the Ashram is an accessory use to the primary use, The Temple, a place of worship, permitted in AAA residential zone with site plan approval.
  - iii) We are requesting a determination that the property at 301 Demarest Parkway (Tax # 98.08-4-71.1 and Tax # 98.08-4-71.2), designated as the Community Center is an accessory use to the primary use, The Temple, a place of worship, permitted in AAA residential zone with site plan approval. A church community center, though used for social and communal activities, remains an extension of the church's spiritual mission and is often imbued with prayer, scripture study, and religious fellowship. These activities foster devotion and deepen communal faith, aligning with the broader purpose of worship. Therefore, the center functions as a place of worship by nurturing the spiritual life of the congregation outside the sanctuary itself. A careful review of the activities associated with each part of the community center listed in Section 3b above, reinforces the spiritual and worshipful nature of the intended use of the Community Center.
- b) **Continuance of existing non-conforming bulk & density:** We are requesting continuance of existing non-conforming bulk and density including exceeding Maximum Lot Coverage, limited to 5% in the zoning law; exceeding Minimum Yard Requirements with setback limits

of: Front-80', Side-50', and Rear-50'; and exceeding Maximum Building Height of 15 feet. The existing non-conformity is shown in the tabular summaries below in normal un-bold type.

- c) **Requested Area Variances:** We are requesting an area variance for each of five specific proposed alterations. These are indicated in the tabular summaries in bold type. The alterations all apply to the Community Center and are as follows:
- i) **Community Center Lot Coverage:** The proposed building additions for the studio area and cafeteria patio will increase the total impervious surface area by 4,338 sq. ft. The new kitchen area does not increase the impervious area coverage because it displaces existing asphalt driveway. The proposed new 15,680 sq. ft. parking area to the North will be a grass parking area for overflow parking the few times during the year when it will be needed and will not increase the total percentage of impervious surface lot coverage. The building additions will increase the total percentage of lot coverage from 28.7% to 31.9%. We are requesting an area variance to allow this increase.
  - ii) **Community Center South Front Yard Setback:** An outdoor dining patio will extend along the entire south side of the proposed cafeteria space. We are proposing an awning covering for the dining patio. We are also proposing covered entries at each of the two south entrances, but the covered entries will encroach less than the proposed awning. The awning will reduce the front yard setback to 2.58 feet. We are requesting an area variance to allow this reduction in the required front yard setback.
  - iii) **Community Center East Front Yard Setback:** We are proposing a covered entry at the east entrance. The covered entry will reduce the front yard setback to 25.76 feet. We are requesting an area variance to allow this reduction in the required front yard setback.
  - iv) **Community Center Number of Stories:** A possible future expansion of the number of transient living quarters provided would include the development of a 2<sup>nd</sup> story over the lodging wing of the project building. We are requesting an area variance to add a second story.
  - v) **Ashram Lot Coverage:** The existing parking lot is being expanded from 42 vehicles and 16,287 sq. ft. to 61 vehicles and 19,352 sq. ft. This will increase the total percentage of lot coverage from 34% to 39%. We are requesting an area variance to allow this increase.
- d) **Review Criteria for Area Variances:** The proposed area variances will enable the Bhakti Marga organization to realize its vision for a world-class center of spiritual practice that serves both its members and the wider community. Importantly, the requested variances are internal to the Bhakti Marga campus and will have minimal, if any, adverse impact on neighboring properties. For example, the reduced setbacks affect only internal streetscapes bounded by other Bhakti Marga-owned buildings. Our response to the five statutory criteria follows:
- i) *Whether an undesirable change will be produced in the character of the neighborhood or a detriment to nearby properties will be created by the granting of the area variance:* The existing buildings—formerly Our Lady of Lourdes Church, school, and convent—have long been integrated into the neighborhood in both function and appearance. The

proposed alterations are modest in scale and scope, and will not introduce any undesirable changes to the surrounding character. Instead, they reflect a thoughtful adaptation and continued harmonious use of the property.

- ii) *Whether the benefit sought by the applicant can be achieved by some method, feasible for the applicant to pursue, other than an area variance:* The proposed modifications are the minimum necessary to meet Bhakti Marga's programmatic needs. Given the constraints posed by existing structures and site layout—most of which predate current zoning requirements—there are no reasonable alternatives that would avoid the need for relief. The strict standards of the AAA residential zone for “other uses” make full compliance practically infeasible.
- iii) *Whether the requested area variance is substantial:* While some variances may appear substantial on paper when measured against zoning requirements, they are minor in the context of the existing site conditions. For example, the zoning code requires an 80-foot front yard setback, but the existing building is already located only 18.5 feet from the property line. The proposed patio and awning would reduce this further to 2.58 feet—but these are open, unenclosed features that do not add visual mass. They serve to enhance the building's engagement with the street and pedestrian realm. Viewed in this light, the proposed variance is proportionate, contextually appropriate, and does not undermine zoning intent.
- iv) *Whether the proposed variance will have an adverse effect or impact on the physical or environmental conditions in the neighborhood or district:* The proposed changes primarily affect internal relationships within the Bhakti Marga campus. The sole exception is the new studio addition, which conforms to existing setbacks and is located more than 50 feet from the nearest adjacent property to the side. The building additions will reflect the architectural language of the existing structures, and the new parking area will be screened with landscaping to minimize any visual or environmental impact.
- v) *Whether the alleged difficulty was self-created:* The project is shaped by pre-existing conditions, including the location and configuration of legacy buildings. The need for variances arises not from actions taken by the applicant, but from the effort to adapt existing facilities to contemporary needs while respecting their historic form and function. Therefore, the difficulties are not self-created and should not weigh against the granting of the requested relief.

e) Tabular summary of areas

Parcel	Area	Building	Area	% Coverage
Tax # 98.08-4-70 Tax # 98.08-3-19	1.260 acres 54,885.6 Sq. Ft.	Temple Building Parking Total	7,231 Sq. Ft. 18,586 Sq. Ft. 25,817 Sq. Ft.	13.2% 33.9% 47.0%
Tax # 98.08-4-71.1 &  Tax # 98.08-4-71.2  Merged	2.103 acres 91,606.68 Sq. Ft.  0.932 acres 40,597.92 Sq. Ft.  3.035 acres 132,204.6 Sq. Ft.	Community Center Building Parking/drives Total   Building Parking/drives Total	Existing 28,509 Sq. Ft. 9,379 Sq. Ft. 37,888 Sq. Ft.  <b>Proposed</b> <b>35,037 Sq. Ft.**</b> <b>7,189 Sq. Ft.</b> <b>42,226 Sq. Ft.</b>	21.6% 7.1% 28.7%  <b>26.5%</b> <b>5.4%</b> <b>31.9%</b>
Tax # 98.08-4-24	1.395 acres 60,766.2 Sq. Ft.	Ashram Building Parking Total   Building Parking Total	Existing 4,368 Sq. Ft. 16,287 Sq. Ft. 20,655 Sq. Ft.  <b>Proposed</b> <b>4,368 Sq. Ft.</b> <b>19,352 Sq. Ft.</b> <b>23,720 Sq. Ft.</b>	7.2% 26.8% 34.0%  <b>7.2%</b> <b>31.8%</b> <b>39.0%</b>

\*\* Includes additions of Studio (2506 SF), Kitchen (2187 SF), Patio (1251 SF), & three covered entrances (584 SF) for a total of 6,528 SF.

f) Tabular Summary of Existing and Proposed Bulk & Density

Building	Front	Side	Back	Height
Zoning Requirement	80 feet	50 feet	50 feet	15 feet 1 story
Temple	East 41.31' South 40.51'	44.88 feet	> 50 feet	±36 feet 1 story
Community Center	South 18.58' exg. <b>2.58' proposed</b> West 30.67' East 37.76' exg. <b>25.76' proposed</b>	> 50 feet	N/A	15-26 feet 1 story (current) <b>2 story (future)</b>
Ashram	North 28' West 45.52'	> 50 feet	N/A	±32 feet 2 ½ story

g) Parking

- i) Interpretation of parking requirements is based on most intensive requirement (ie the auditorium) not on the sum of all building uses since the people that will be lodging or dining will not simultaneously be in the auditorium. Auditorium occupancy is based on actual seating capacity as shown on the drawings.
- ii) Total Parking required of 162 spaces for auditorium plus 8 spaces for the ashram is a total of 170 spaces. Total parking provided is 172 spaces, which includes expanding the East parking lot and adding additional parking to the North. Screen planting will be provided to partially hide the new parking area.
- iii) Parking arrangements during large events.

Large events which will attract greater than 400 people may occur as noted above. The overflow parking required will be met by three strategies:

- 1. Street parking in the area is hardly utilized at all and can provide a significant amount of additional parking.
- 2. The parking lot at Hendy Elementary school can provide additional parking since any large events will typically occur on week-ends.
- 3. Many people will be staying at hotels and motels in the area. A shuttle service will be provided so that event participants can leave their vehicles at their lodging place.

h) Signage

- i) General Identification signage and notification of events can be placed on the existing sign kiosks for the temple and community building.

## **7) Site Planning Considerations**

- a) Storm Water Management: Existing pattern of storm water management will, for the most part, be unchanged; with the exception of four modified areas. The additional drainage areas are in all four cases relatively small.
  - i) New roof drains for the kitchen and studio additions will be tied into the existing building roof and perimeter drain system which drains into the existing municipal storm water system.
  - ii) The new patio storm water runoff will be collected by a trench drain along the south edge of the patio and then piped to a nearby catch basin on West First St.
  - iii) The future kitchen addition will require relocation of one catch basin currently located in the macadam driveway near the building.



- iv) The macadam parking at the ashram site will increase by 3,065 sq. ft. This lot will be sloped to drain to the existing drainage swale which runs along the East edge of the property until it enters a culvert which discharges into the Chemung River.
- b) Site Lighting: Site lighting is being improved as outlined below. All new fixtures are dark sky compliant. Light fixture selections and Site Lighting Plans are included as attachments to our site plan submittal.
- i) Parking lot lighting on 18'-20' poles includes five new lights along the south edge of the large parking area North of the Temple and two new lights to illuminate the overflow parking area. The existing two parking area lights on poles at the Ashram parking lot will remain. The Temple parking lot lighting is augmented by three existing street lights (one at each corner and one at the center) along First St.
  - ii) The Cafeteria Patio will be lit by wall mounted downlights and the three entrances will have recessed can downlights in the canopy ceilings. The entrance fixtures will be equipped with 90 minute battery backup as required by code for emergency egress.
  - iii) Two new period style pole fixtures matching the existing poles along the sidewalk east of the Temple will be added along the sidewalk east of the Community Center. This sidewalk light, although not strictly necessary, will aesthetically tie the Community Center and Temple.
  - iv) Ground mounted uplights that will softly illuminate the architectural beauty of the Temple and Ashram will be located along the East side of the Temple (at each buttress) and at the West side of the Ashram(at each gable end).
- c) Site Landscaping: The existing site landscaping is quite nice with a large variety of deciduous and coniferous trees and shrubs. Future improvements and existing plantings are shown on the attached Site Landscaping Plan. Some important features of that plan are as follows:
- i) The Owner would like to extend the median strip on Demarest Parkway into the block between West First St. and West Second St. and is discussing that possibility with the Town Superintendent. The existing trees planted in the median would be replaced with a flowering tree and the same type(s) would be planted in the new median. Some good choices being considered are Amelanchier x grandiflora 'Robin Hill' or Malus 'Adirondack' Crabapple.
  - ii) A row of flowering trees in the yard space between the Temple and Demarest Pkwy. that will create visual harmony and seasonal layering with the trees in the median: Royal Raindrops Crabapple, Kousa Dogwood, or Japanese Snowbell. Perhaps a mixture of two of these three.
  - iii) A row of 16 Norway spruce along the west side of the extension of Demarest Parkway North of W. Second St. is clearly distressed and will be replaced over time with Magnolia Trees (x loebneri 'Leonard Messel', 'Merrill'). Underplanted with shrubs like viburnum, fothergilla, or hydrangea for lower screening and seasonal variety.

- iv) A variety of new Maple trees, as indicated on the landscape plan, will be planted between the two parking lots North of the Temple (Red Maple), in the yard space between the streets and building on both East and West Sides of the Community Center (Sugar Maple), at the front of the Community Center (Red Maple) in a symmetrical arrangement with two flowering crab trees.
- v) The space between the cafeteria patio retaining wall and the side walk will be planted with the crabapple trees mentioned above. Malus 'Adirondack' would be the only choice for the narrow space. Some companion planting for the space along with the crabapples might include: Catmint, Bloody Cranesbill, Creeping Thyme, Heuchera "Palace Purple", Native Sedges, and Salvia nemorosa 'May Night'.
- vi) The low yard area between the North of the Community Center and the new Grass Parking lot will be planted with two Wisconsin Weeping Willow Trees and two Weeping Willow Bushes (Salix caprea 'Pendula' 'Weeping Pussy Willow').
- vii) Two new garden areas are planned: A rose garden at the North end of the Temple and a small vegetable & herbal garden behind the Ashram. Also behind the Ashram are some recently planted apple and pear trees.
- viii) Please see our Site landscape plan for additional miscellaneous new planting as well as the extensive existing landscaping.
- ix) The grass parking area will be layered to promote good drainage and structural stability with an 8" bed of ¾" crushed stone, 2" bedding layer of washed sand, and 4"-6" layer of topsoil with seeded grass. (A low maintenance, tough, cold-hardy blend: 70%-80% Turf-type Tall Fescue, 18%-20% Kentucky Blue Grass, 10%-15% Perennial Ryegrass).

## 8) Conclusion

We believe that this renovation and expansion project will serve as a valuable religious and cultural resource for the community while upholding principles of safety, sustainability, and neighborhood harmony. We appreciate the Council's consideration and welcome the opportunity to discuss any additional details or concerns.

Thank you for your time and support. Please do not hesitate to reach out with any further questions. Please refer all questions to the Architect.

This document prepared by:

Lawrence Hoetzlein  
607-546-8484  
[lhmatrix@empireaccess.net](mailto:lhmatrix@empireaccess.net)  
Anne Hersh Architect

Rishi Jaigopal  
607-663-1579  
[jaigopalananda@bhaktimarga.org](mailto:jaigopalananda@bhaktimarga.org)  
Bhakti Marga America