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Church pact irks residents

By: Matt Berringer

Despite assertions by Cheltenham Township Commissioners that an agreement guaranteeing tax revenue from the West Oak Lane Church of God protects the township, some residents feel as though they have been silenced.

In accordance with an agreement signed last November, the Cheltenham Building and Zoning Committee voted unanimously last week to take no action regarding a proposal to build a so-called "mega church" near Ashbourne Road and Washington Lane.

Last November, the township commissioners entered into an agreement with West Oak Lane Church of God guaranteeing that in exchange for the church agreeing to pay taxes on the parcel, the township would make no recommendations to the Cheltenham Zoning Hearing Board on the church's zoning requests.

"We think it was an unusual step to enter into as commissioners and we are not sure what the agreement does to the voice of the people since the commissioners speak for the people," said Rita Katz of Elkins Avenue, one of a group of residents who are concerned about the scope of the proposed building.

At last week's meeting, Building and Zoning Committee Chairman Michael Swavola said the township entered into the agreement with the church in order to protect the township by securing property taxes.

As advised by the township solicitor the commissioners have not commented on the agreement since the meeting.

Township Solicitor Andrew Cantor said he believes the commissioners made it clear to the church that the township, which has a substantial number of tax-exempt properties, needed a contribution from the church.

"Early on I think we let them know that that we wanted taxes," he said.

Neither Cantor nor West Oak Lane's Attorney Marc Jonas recalls who proposed the agreement originally.

"I think the discussion was kind of an evolution," Jonas said. "The township's concern was about its eroding tax base and abundance of tax-exempt institutions."

According to Jonas, the church entered into the agreement as a good faith measure in order to show the township it intends to be a good neighbor.

"They are doing exactly what you hope a religious institution would do - be considerate," he said.

The building and zoning committee's decision to take no action regarding the item does not influence the way the hearing board will rule and residents will have a chance to testify for or against the proposal during the hearing.

However, residents are uneasy with the amount of restraint the agreement puts on the township.

If zoning relief is granted, the church can appeal the assessed value of the property. Once the appeal is made and a new assessment is determined, it cannot be increased unless substantial changes are made to the property.

The zoning hearing board is scheduled to begin the hearing at 7:30 p.m. Aug. 17 at Curtis Hall.

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