

06/25/2004

Church plans OK'd by zoning board

By: Joe Barron

Expressing warm wishes for success and the hope a persistent blight in Wyndmoor may finally be eliminated, the Springfield Zoning Hearing Board approved an ambitious development project for the old PathMark building on Ivy Hill Road Tuesday.

The board granted numerous variances and special exceptions to the West Oak Lane Church of God, which plans to turn the building into an educational, conference and business development center. Advertisement

The unanimous vote followed two extended hearings before the board. Officials of the church, based at 7433 Limekiln Pike in Philadelphia, first presented the project to the board in March. Testimony continued in May as Joe Bagley, the attorney representing the township commissioners, cross-examined church representatives about potential parking overflow.

The questions were apparently intended only to gather information. Bagley said Tuesday the commissioners neither supported nor opposed the project. But zoning board members had nothing but praise for the church's plan. In the brief discussion before the vote, board Chairman Daniel Clifford complimented both the church's design and the thoroughness of its presentation.

"This lot has been a blight on the township for years," he said. "The applicant has presented a superior project "

The building, located at 1331 Ivy Hill Road, has stood vacant since September 2003, when the previous occupant, a physical fitness center, moved out after failing to adhere to township sanitation codes.

Under the church's plans, the expanded building will contain a banquet and conference room, a day-care center, an elementary school with a gymnasium and auditorium, a coffee shop, a barbershop, and 15 small offices to be occupied by start-up businesses. The architect's drawing also shows a fenced play area along the rear property line and more than 30 trees and shrubs planted along Ivy Hill Road.

"I can't say how impressed I am with your vision," board member Ron Altieri said before the vote.

During his cross-examinations, Bagley raised the possibility that scheduling a school athletic or stage event and a banquet at the same time could cause parking to overflow onto the residential streets across the township's border with Philadelphia.

Church officials told Bagley they would avoid such scheduling conflicts. The board's approval assumed the officials would keep their word, even if the board did not make the promise a formal condition for granting the variances, zoning Solicitor Charles King said.

"You've taken their testimony at face value," King told the board members.

Ted Harris, West Oak Lane's director of operations, said construction would begin as soon as the church received its permits from the township. Because of financing constraints, he said, the center has to open by September 2005.

In other business Tuesday, a Lafayette Hill couple withdrew their application for variances that would have allowed them to operate an office in a carriage house behind their home.

James Simpson and Katherine Wilde of the 300 block of Manor Road said they were withdrawing their request because the township commissioners opposed it, and they understood the zoning board usually votes as the commissioners' desire.

Wilde said she did not understand the township's opposition. She was offering to put a permanent conservation easement on 2 acres of her property in return for a variance that would allow her to employ two workers in the carriage house.

"This is a lot that is wanted by developers," she said. "Someday, as you watch townhouses go up on this land, I want you to remember your role."

Implying Wilde and Simpson were making a mistake in withdrawing their application, Clifford and King both replied the zoning hearing board was an independent body and would not necessarily follow the township commissioners' recommendation.

In addition, they said, by withdrawing their application, Wilde and Simpson could not appeal to county court if the board's decision went against them.

At its March working session, the township commissioners said they opposed the application because it would set a bad precedent by trading a variance in return for a preservation easement.

Such an arrangement would, in essence, discriminate against residents who wanted to employ workers in their homes but had no land to offer the township, they said.