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Group fights 1,300-seat church

Neighbors in Cheltenham Twp. say West Oak Lane Church of God's proposal would create traffic havoc.

By Larry Fish
Inquirer Staff Writer

A Philadelphia church hoping to move into larger quarters in Cheltenham Township is facing opposition from potential neighbors who say a narrow street can't accommodate what they call a "mega-church" with seven-day-a-week traffic.

The West Oak Lane Church of God, now at Washington Lane and Limekiln Pike, owns 8.4 undeveloped acres along two-lane Ashbourne Road just over the Montgomery County line.

Church attorney Marc Jonas said the site's present commercial zoning permits the uses planned by the church, including a bowling alley, cafe, fitness center, a small movie theater and a 1,300-seat sanctuary.

Neighbors, however, have organized and hired an experienced land-use lawyer to fight the project.

"Nobody has a problems with a church," said Karin Helstrom, copresident of the Elkins Park Neighbors Association.

But she and other residents contend that West Oak Lane's plans would mean far more intensive use of the property than is the case at the several dozen churches already in the township.

Neighbors call West Oak Lane a mega-church because the two Sunday morning services could serve 2,600 worshippers and say that the traffic would overwhelm narrow-shouldered Ashbourne Road.

Church leaders declined to discuss their church, its mission or its plans. They referred calls to Jonas, of Doylestown, who said the original plans calling for 125,000 square feet of mixed uses under one roof are not final.

"We have an architect looking at it and tweaking it," he said.

Jonas said the church had hired its own traffic experts to study the plans.

"We are aware that there are strong feelings in opposition," Jonas said. "We think those feelings are unfounded."

The dispute has the potential to turn into a years-long legal battle, as have other fights over religious use of property.

A Reform Jewish group, Congregation Kol Ami, has been in court since 2001 over its plan to establish a synagogue and Hebrew school in a former convent in Abington, opposed by neighbors.

Kol Ami last month announced plans for a new home - in Cheltenham Township - but litigation over the Abington site continues.

Kol Ami's lawsuit was one of the first cases in the nation to invoke the federal Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000. That law says that municipalities must have a compelling public reason for denying religious groups the use of property.

Both West Oak Lane's attorney, Jonas, and the attorney for the Elkins Parks Neighbors, Peter S. Friedman, are veterans of the Kol Ami litigation.

Jonas, however, said the cases are "like night and day," primarily because Kol Ami wanted to locate in a residential-zoned area, while West Oak Lane's property is zoned for commercial use.

The West Oak Lane Church of God has asked for zoning variances to go ahead with its plans. Two public hearings are

being held to gather comments from the public and the church tonight and next week, and a hearing before the Zoning Hearing Board is scheduled for Aug. 17.

Though church property used for religious purposes is normally exempt from paying property taxes, the church has agreed to make payments in lieu of taxes on the full assessed value of the building, which is to be determined after construction, said Township Manager David G. Kraynick.

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