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Multipurpose center proposed by church

By: Joe Barron

The Springfield Zoning Hearing Board heard testimony Monday on an ambitious \$6 million plan to convert the abandoned Wyndmoor Pathmark to a multipurpose church center.

Representatives of the West Oak Lane Church of God asked the board for three special exceptions and 12 variances that would allow them to divide the store into a day-care center, elementary school, banquet room, lecture hall, coffee shop and a business development center.

The building, located at 1331 Ivy Hill Road, has stood empty since last September, when Philly Total Fitness and Dance, an exercise center, went out of business after failing to conform to township building codes.

The church, which has about 1,200 members, would continue to hold services in its original building at Washington Lane and Limekiln Pike, according to its pastor, the Rev. Horace Sheppard.

The elementary school would hold classes for children from prekindergarten through fifth grade and would serve about 345 students, Janice Hill, the school's principal, told the board.

Ted Harris, the church's director of operations, said the church would run the day-care center, banquet hall, school and coffee shop, but it would lease offices to small, independent businesses through its business development center.

Although the church is a nonprofit organization, the business center would generate tax revenue for the township, he said.

The hearing board did not rule on the variances and special exceptions Monday. Rather, it granted a continuance until next month to give the township board of commissioners a chance to consider the proposal and perhaps take a position on it. Township Solicitor Joseph Bagley appeared at the zoning hearing at the request of the commissioners, but only as a fact-finder. The township commissioners, who were unfamiliar with the details of the church's plan, did not authorize him to oppose or endorse it.

Bagley's more skeptical questions concerned parking. The church application requested a variance allowing 219 parking spaces, although John A. Teets, the project's architect, testified that for all the uses planned and all the people served, the township code would require 525.

Teets testified the variance was justified, since parents dropping off their day-care and elementary-age children would not park in the lot, and the banquet hall would be occupied mostly evenings and weekends.

Bagley suggested a parking crunch could occur if parents arrived for a student recital or other event at the same time the banquet hall, lecture hall, coffee shop and offices were all in use.

Teets replied such a worst-case scenario was possible, but not likely.

Residents of the Philadelphia neighborhood across Ivy Hill Road who attended the meeting also spoke to the issue, expressing the fear that overflow parking from the church center would end up on their streets.

Bagley said he might call his own expert witnesses at the next hearing.

In other business Monday, the board denied a variance to a Wyndmoor resident who said he intended to subdivide his property.

Charles Hill, of the 8600 block of Wyndmoor Avenue, told the board his back yard borders the property of Chestnut Hill Rehabilitation Hospital, which, he said, has become an eyesore, lowering the value of his home. Without subdividing his yard and having another home built there, he could not realize a premium on his property, he said.

Several of Hill's neighbors opposed his application. They contended a new home would ruin the historic character of the neighborhood, despite Hill's assurances he would require any builder to meet his certain design specifications.

The variance would have reduced the side-yard setback requirements for Hill's own lot when the new property lines were drawn. Hill said he needed the lower setback because of a bay window on his house.

Zoning officials said Hill failed to demonstrate sufficient hardship for the application, and a subdivision required the approval of the township board of commissioners.

"There's no reason to grant him a gratuitous variance," Charles King, the board's solicitor, said. "If he's resourceful, he can find another way to develop the property."

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