



07/25/2007

Residents' hearts not fonder one year later

By: Melissa Brooks , Staff Writer

The Cheltenham Zoning Hearing Board heard the first testimony in a year July 18 regarding the proposed construction of a 125,000-square-foot church on the 8.4-acre parcel between the Elkins Park Post Office and Lynnewood Gardens Aquatic Club on Ashbourne Road.

Neighbors have not changed their position since last summer: They do not oppose the church; they oppose its size and scope. The series of hearings began in August 2005 after the West Oak Lane Church of God Inc., represented by attorney Marc Jonas, requested special exception and/or variances from the township zoning code to erect a three-story community center for religious purposes.

The proposed "mega church" would hold 1,333 worshippers in its sanctuary. The design calls for an 1,850-square-foot chapel and other activity and gathering rooms for youths, adults and seniors.

The building would also house a four-lane bowling alley; a gymnasium that seats more than 500 spectators; 22 classrooms for 965 students; a family cinema with 140 seats; a café that seats 167 patrons; an 1,875-square-foot fitness center; a bookstore; and a television studio.

The church has presented its case at previous hearings with a traffic engineer, land planner and architect as witnesses.

Testimony continued at Curtis Hall with architect David B. Brawer speaking for the Elkins Park Neighbors Association, which is represented by attorney Robert Sugarman.

Brawer, whose practice focuses on institutional and nonprofit buildings, said in his professional opinion, the proposed religious use is inappropriate and out of character with the surrounding community.

In recent years Brawer said he has testified at public hearings on behalf of religious institutions in Philadelphia, Whitemarsh and Lower Merion townships.

He could only characterize one of his projects as even approaching the size of what is proposed, a 25,000-square-foot church in Gloucester County, N.J. That church occupied 13 percent of an 18-acre site. According to Brawer, the proposed West Oak Lane Church would inhabit 14.4 percent of the 8.4-acre site.

The neighbors association's architect said he studied the church architect's drawing and site plan as well as relevant township ordinances. He said he concluded the proposed building is "too dense" for the site and erecting the church as proposed "will have adverse consequences" including overbuilding and increased traffic flow.

Jonas objected on the grounds that Brawer is not a traffic expert but was overruled by zoning board President Peter Labiak. Brawer claimed there are a number of proposed uses not considered customary for a religious building. A bowling alley and movie theater are "heavily used recreational areas to engage people throughout the day," he said. To him, this means an intensity of use separate from religious.

"Ashbourne Road isn't just another thoroughfare in the township," Brawer said. He noted the road's "prominent architectural character," which he said is important to preserve.

When Jonas cross-examined Brawer, he asked if the surrounding post office and school district administration building are considered historical buildings. Brawer answered no for the post office and yes for the school, because it appeared to be at least 50 years old, he said.

A structure like the one proposed would "erode the quality of life in the neighborhood," Brawer said. Because it is typical to cheapen materials and mechanical systems when construction bids come in high, a "general deterioration of the exterior" will affect the community.

Certainly there are some accessory uses that are appropriate, he said. But overall, the project as he reviewed it will be "contrary to public welfare," property value and neighborhood aesthetics.

Two neighbors followed Brawer's testimony, Franklin J. Carter and Coletta Brady, both residents for more than 20 years.

Carter, who lives around the corner from the site, said he has an issue with the volume of traffic the church will attract.

Present traffic conditions are relatively light, he said.

He anticipates a dramatic increase in traffic and assumes people will park in his neighborhood, a "prime target" because it is within walking distance.

Brady, who lives on Ashbourne Road, said she often drives by the West Oak Lane Church at Washington Lane and Limekiln Pike in Philadelphia and sometimes they have outdoor services with drums. She does not want the building to turn her peaceful neighborhood into a "hectic" area, she said.

Labiak said neighbors can still testify. He also told the Church and Elkins Park Neighbors Association about recent changes to the township parking ordinance that may or may not affect the proposed project's onsite parking. Both sides will have the opportunity to present their case if changes are relevant, he said.

The next hearing is scheduled for 7:30 p.m. Sept. 10 at Curtis Hall.