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Sides argue parking for mega church

By: Mischa Aaron Arnosky , Staff Writer

With 10 meetings already under its belt dating back to 2005, the Cheltenham Zoning Hearing Board continued testimony Sept. 10 on a proposed 125,000-square-foot church on an 8.4-acre plot on Ashbourne Road on the northwest side of the Elkins Park post office.

In the second meeting of the year after returning from a year's hiatus in July, testimony focused on parking uses. Because the proposed church would house several nontraditional church facilities, such as a 1,300-square-foot four-lane bowling alley, a 2,400-square-foot bookstore, a 7,500-square-foot gym and 21,200 square feet of classrooms, it is difficult to discern parking uses.

Adding to the confusion is the fact the Cheltenham Board of Commissioners revised the township's parking ordinance in February. Attorney Robert Sugarman, representing the Elkins Park Neighbors Association, questioned why the township revised the ordinance knowing there was such a large project in limbo.

"I don't know why they changed the ordinance," Sugarman said after the hearing Monday. "This is a huge project [and] the commissioners didn't take it into account. And if they did take it into account, why didn't they provide for it? Someone was asleep at the switch in writing that ordinance as far as the church goes, though it may work perfectly well for other things."

Marc Jonas, representing the church, West Oak Lane Church of God Inc., said the new parking ordinance contains "less rigorous" regulations and the proposed church would have the right to follow them, adding the plan developed by the church and its architects is a "very different concept" that includes several ancillary uses.

Architect David B. Brawer, testifying on behalf of the EPNA and Lynnewood Gardens, which is adjacent to the site, said breaking down land uses for the proposed church is "very problematic."

"There are many other uses in the building that don't fall into any of the uses of the parking ordinance," he said.

Brawer said parking requirements for the church would differ depending on how each portion of the building is classified.

Sugarman, while cross-examining Brian Ciampitti, architect witness for the church, asked if he based most of the parking requirements for the proposed church on uses other than religious ones. Ciampitti said portions, including the fitness center, library and theater, were based on entertainment and recreational uses rather than religious.

"The uses that are set forth in the ordinance are totally inept and [you] can't determine which standard to apply," Sugarman said after the meeting.

The bottom line number of parking spots required, according to Ciampitti, is 453, of which 190 are used for worship. He said 163 parking spots are planned for a PECO right of way, off-site on Ivy Hill Road. Sugarman said 520 parking spots would be needed and 800 would be needed under the old ordinance.

There was also discussion as to whether a proposed 2,200-square-foot music studio, which Sugarman said has connotations of a small room, is actually a gathering area to be

used for choir practice, and debate as to whether the classrooms would be exclusive to children - thus changing parking requirements.

Aside from parking requirement minutiae, residents voiced their general opposition.

Karin Helstrom, co-president of the EPNA, said she hasn't come across any residents who support the proposed plan and added that the "gigantic church" would add to noise and traffic.

"Not one resident is in favor of the plan," Helstrom said. "Not one. It's too big and the only people who show up for the church are their lawyers."

Resident Judy Harris likened the church and its amenities to a country club and said if the township brings in items like a movie theater, a bowling alley and a bookstore, it should at least see some tax revenue.

One resident bluntly asked church representatives if they were trying to "build a Superdome or something?"

Jonas said after the meeting that residents simply don't like the idea of a new, large church in the area.

"They're just trying to pick apart an application because the neighbors just don't want it for whatever reason," he said. "This is a church that wants to invite its members and its families to come to the church for whatever it wants to do - and that's the whole idea."

With three witnesses for the church remaining, the hearing will continue Oct. 30.