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Hearing begins for 'mega church'

By: Matt Berringer

Marking the first of what is expected to be months of testimony and with an overflowing crowd on hand, the zoning hearing regarding a proposal to build a large church near Ashbourne Road and Washington Lane finally got under way last week.

Every seat in Curtis Hall was filled and the walls were lined with residents concerned about the proposal by West Oak Lane Church of God Advertisement to build a 125,000-square-foot building containing a 1,300-seat sanctuary, a gymnasium, a family cinema and more.

The church is seeking a special exception for religious use of the property and a variance for a 60-foot-wide driveway. The church had previously also been asking for permission to build a guard house at the end of the driveway and for a 10-foot-high fence, taller than code allows.

As the meeting began, Cheltenham Zoning Hearing Board President Peter Labiak noted the extreme interest from residents but also said the board's decision will be based on the facts presented in the case, not by how many people are on either side.

"It's a matter of law, not a popularity contest," he said.

Three attorneys representing various interests were present at the hearing including Marc Jonas representing the church, Robert Sugarman representing the Elkins Park Neighbors Association and Michael Yanoff representing Lynnewood Gardens apartment complex.

Yanoff previously said Lynnewood Gardens is concerned about the development. He said there is potential for the church patrons to use the complex's parking as an alternative to driving to remote sites dedicated for overflow parking.

Jonas presented an introduction to his case that noted a previous decision by the board allowing another religious group, Congregation Kol Ami, to take possession of a property in the township and made reference to the federal Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act.

Kol Ami entered into an agreement of sale for the Wordsworth Academy property at 509 Ashbourne Road and received a special exception from the Cheltenham Zoning Hearing Board to establish a synagogue and religious school on the 5-plus-acre site zoned residential.

Jonas said he hoped the township would expand its history of welcoming religious groups by approving the construction of a new church.

The federal Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act of 2000 was designed as a way to keep townships and boroughs from discouraging religious groups to build.

In prior meetings, residents said they are not concerned about a church being built on the property. They are concerned with the scope of the project and say they fear it will create too much traffic and too much noise.

The church is proposing to build a three-story building which will house a 1,345-seat sanctuary, classrooms totaling 21,180 square feet, a fitness center, a bookstore, a gym, a family cinema and more.

The estimated cost of constructing the building is \$10 million

The hearing was continued until 7:30 p.m. Sept. 21 in Curtis Hall. Further testimony from the church is expected