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## No action taken on 'Mega Church'

By: Matt Berringer

**In accordance with an agreement signed last November, the Cheltenham Building and Zoning Committee voted unanimously to take no action regarding a proposal to build a so-called "Mega Church" near Ashbourne Road and Washington Lane.**

Last November, the township commissioners entered into an agreement with West Oak Lane Church of God guaranteeing that in exchange for the church agreeing to pay taxes on the parcel, the township would make no recommendations to the Cheltenham Zoning Hearing Board on the church's zoning requests. Advertisement

Before opening up discussion from representatives of West Oak Lane and residents Tuesday, building and zoning committee Chairman Michael Swavola said the commissioners determined the agreement would be signed "protect the community."

According to the agreement, the church will be required to pay real estate taxes on the property if it is approved for constructed, but it can also appeal the assessed value of the property. In addition, the church will not have to be reassessed in the future if the proposed facilities remain the same.

The agreement does not preclude the zoners from denying zoning relief, or the board of commissioners from denying land development approval should it make it through the zoners.

For the second week in a row, the room was filled to capacity with a large number of people who had a lot to say about the proposal.

In the end, deciding instead to save their concerns for the zoning hearing board, only a few people spoke.

Rita Katz of Elkins Avenue said she is concerned with the amount of traffic that could be created by the church.

She said a church of similar size has been constructed in Conshohocken and created a number of issues involving traffic.

She also said the township should not trade away the will of its residents for tax dollars.

"We can't be bought with taxes and should not allow ourselves to be bought with taxes," she said.

The church is proposing to build a three-story building that 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.

Marc Jonas, representing the church, said the proposed construction is planned to only be used by church members.

"I assure you this is a religious use," he said. "We're not opening a Regal Cinema here."

Jonas said all of the amenities provided in the plans for the church are strictly to be used by the congregation and are not for commercial purposes.

"They are all related to members of the congregation ... providing a reason for people to come to church," Jonas said.

The church is seeking special exception with regard to religious use, a variance for a 60-foot-wide driveway entrance, a variance for the construction of a guardhouse at the entrance and for fencing up to 10 feet high at the entrance. The zoning code would be amended to allow religious uses in the M2 Multiple Dwelling district under special exception, according to the church's application.

Last month, the township planning commission recommended that the zoning hearing board deny the application due to the magnitude of the proposal.

The zoning hearing board is scheduled to hear the case at 7:30 p.m. Aug. 17 in Curtis Hall.