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Proposed church shifts some items to Springfield facility

By: Kyle Schulz , Staff Writer

Testimony regarding the use and capacity of certain facilities for the proposed 125,000-square-foot, three-story church on Ashbourne Road continued at the Cheltenham Township Zoning Hearing Board Feb. 2.

According to testimony from Robert Listenbee, a representative for the West Oak Lane Church of God, the church plans to include a four-lane bowling alley, recording studio, gymnasium, family cinema, fitness center, café and a sanctuary that will seat 1,333.

Listenbee said he hopes the proposed church will make a positive mark on the township and its youth.

"We do not believe children should be educated in shopping malls," Listenbee said, adding, "they should receive a Christian education."

However, some residents are concerned the proposed church will snarl traffic along Ashbourne Road, while owners of the Lynnwood Gardens apartment complex are especially worried that congregants will use the complex's parking space rather than drive to an alternative spot designated for church parking.

As of now, plans are being made for an on-site parking lot that would hold 453 vehicles and an off-site parking lot located about two and a half miles away on Ivy Hill Road in Springfield.

The off-site parking lot would hold 563 vehicles.

Two 50-passenger busses would shuttle back and forth between the off-site parking lot and the church.

Listenbee assured Eric Frey, a representative for Lynnwood Gardens, that congregants would make use of the off-site parking.

"When our pastor directs them to do something, they will," Listenbee said, adding later, "we will not have a problem with the parking. I want to make that absolutely clear."

Just how many church members will be inside the church at a given time was a major concern for the Elkins Park Neighbors Association and its attorney Robert Sugarman.

According to Listenbee's testimony, Sunday would see the largest turnout for the week. Two separate services, one from 7 to 9 a.m., and another from 11 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., are planned with two hours in between to allow the crowds and traffic to thin out.

Mondays and Tuesdays, 40 to 59 people will be using the church, while Listenbee estimated between 100 to 300 worshippers could show up for Wednesday services and activities held on Thursday nights.

Listenbee said a maximum of 1,500 people could occupy the church on its dedication day, and also holy days such as Christmas and Easter, and expects the church to draw people from New Jersey and Maryland.

Previous plans to build a banquet facility on the site were scrapped and moved to a location on Ivy Hill Road, but Sugarman wanted confirmation that the church would have no intention of holding a banquet-type event, such as a wedding reception, on the site.

Listenbee responded by saying regardless of whether the Ivy Hill location falls through or not, there are no plans to hold a banquet-style event in the church. The proposed church will be located on an 8.4-acre property bordering Ashbourne Road, Washington Lane, the Cheltenham School District Administration building and the Elkins Park Post Office. The estimated cost of construction is \$10 million.

Hearings will continue at 7:30 p.m. March 22 at Curtis Hall, Greenwood Avenue and Church Road in Wyncote.

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