

Palmer's buyer seeks rezoning and historic status

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File photo Pete Bannan

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It's the proverbial puzzle of the chicken and the egg. Which comes first at the Palmer Theological Seminary?



In a public hearing Wednesday night, Lower Merion commissioners were warm toward a developer's request to rezone the eight-acre campus at Lancaster and City avenues in Wynnewood.

But some members of the board and community organizations want to see more than assurances of good intentions that the seminary building will be preserved as it is converted into rental apartments.

It is in part because that issue is still being sorted out that the board chose not to vote on the rezoning petition this month but wait for more information in May.

The dilemma arises because the development partnership, CL 6E Lancaster Avenue Associates L.P., which has an agreement to buy the property from Eastern University, has begun a process to have the 1919 main building determined eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places so that it can take advantage of federal historic-preservation tax credits.

With rezoning to R-7, which permits multi-family residential uses, the developer plans to convert the Horace Trumbauer-designed main building to house up to 133 apartments.

David Blumenfeld, a partner in the venture, told the board that not only is that step needed to make financing of the project feasible, but that the group would also seek to have the building upgraded to Class 1 status under Lower Merion's historic-preservation ordinance.

Class 1 standing is significant in two ways. Class 1 resources may only be demolished by permission of the board of commissioners, but they are also eligible for incentives, such as relief from impervious-surface limits.

In addition to the main building, the 1950s chapel building on the site would also be converted into a residential building, Blumenfeld said, where another incentive permitting a bed-and-breakfast might be considered.

At its current Class 2 status, the building could be demolished after a maximum 90-day delay.

Attorney Kenneth Aaron, who represents the developers, said they had hoped the Pennsylvania Museum and Historical Commission might act to list the property as soon as June, but now expect the commission won't act on the matter until its next cycle in October.

Township planning staff have generally been supportive of the rezoning, saying that the Palmer Seminary property is the only one of several on that side of Lancaster Avenue that retains R-3 zoning, which would dictate either single-family residential development or another institutional use. Others have already been rezoned to R-7 or, in the case of Lankenau Hospital, to a new Medical Center zone.

A traffic analysis showed little potential added impact with the apartment use.

"We're excited about the possibilities at Palmer," Blumenfeld said, adding that the partnership has previously completed projects to restore and adapt several historic structures in Philadelphia.

The project also makes sense, he said, with growth at Lankenau and, with its location near the Overbrook Train Station, as an opportunity for transit-oriented development. "We think we can do a really beautiful job ... and make it a sustainable property."

Aaron said Eastern University has authorized the partnership to seek Class 1 status, subject to getting rezoning to R-7.

In public comment at the hearing, Carl Watson, representing the Shortridge Civic Association, in whose area Palmer is, said it had chosen not to oppose rezoning, adding that it is "pleased with the nature of this development."

It is the sequence of events that gives some others pause, however.

Leslie Greenberg, representing the Merion Civic Association, said, "The main issue is simple. If you approve R-7, will there be unintended consequences" if financing for this project or Class 1 designation fall through?

"We're asking you to wait to rezone" until Class 1 status is awarded, Greenberg said. "If you go to R-7 [without that protection], anything can happen."

Lower Merion Conservancy executive director Keith Jones told the board that the group is "very supportive of the proposal, but also asks to see Class 1 [status] prior to a change."

While Commissioner Phil Rosenzweig, a real-estate attorney, commented that it is unlikely a conversion project could be undertaken without the tax credits tied to preservation – "Is this anything you could contemplate for more than three seconds without running away, screaming?" he asked Blumenfeld rhetorically – Aaron said there may be a way to calm concerns.

Aaron said between now and a May meeting, he will continue to work with township solicitor Gilbert High on the issue.

“I think we can accomplish this on a simultaneous basis,” he said. “We need the [national] designation to get the tax credits, and we need Class 1 to get the incentives to make this work economically.”

Eastern University, has said that, if the seminary property is sold, it plans to move its operations to its main campus in Radnor