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Lower Merion planners OK synagogue, Ardmore townhouse and Palmer Seminary projects

Tuesday, February 7, 2012

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In a single sitting Monday night that stretched into Tuesday morning, the Lower Merion Township Planning Commission reviewed some of the township's most complex recent land use applications, sending two forward to the board of commissioners for action Wednesday night and a third a shorter step ahead to a hearing a little later this month.

Taking the last one first, the planners decided that Temple Beth Hillel/Beth El had made its case – just barely – for an incentive to exceed impervious surface limits and nearly double parking on its historic property in Wynnewood.

But in a matter that has caused controversy among neighbors, including some of the congregation's own longtime members, they recommended eliminating some of the proposed parking to save trees on the lot at Lancaster Avenue and Remington Road.

And, contrary to the temple's request, they want to see permanent protection for all three historic structures in the complex, including the original 1880s manor house, the gatehouse at that prominent corner and the 1960s synagogue building itself.

In another case, the commission recommended approval of a preliminary plan of land development for a new townhouse development on South Wyoming Avenue in Ardmore. With qualms still about the density of the project, which proposes two twin houses and 10 townhouses for a total 14 units on just about one acre, leaving limited green space, they included a condition calling on the developer to provide full porches on the twin units facing Wyoming Avenue. That is to make them more compatible with that street of large single-family Victorian and Queen Anne-style late 19th-century homes.

The more attractive but still complicated application involves another step in the proposed conversion of the Palmer Theological Seminary's historic buildings on the campus at City and Lancaster avenues in Wynnewood into apartments. With far less controversy, the developer of that project, like the synagogue, wants to use the historic preservation incentive to increase impervious surface. In this case, however, the developer wants to hold some required parking in reserve to maintain green space. Approval is also sought for relief from the township's open space preservation requirements for larger lots, given that the property is already fully developed.

Both the Wyoming Avenue and Palmer cases were to be heard by the board's Building and Planning Committee Feb. 8.

Temple Beth Hillel's application will be the subject of a continued conditional use hearing Feb. 21.

Temple Beth Hillel/Beth El

In an initial session in late January, a hearing on the synagogue's conditional use application was continued before it could present testimony why it needs to replace a long-used front lawn parking area with a new paved lot, nearly doubling permanent parking on the site. Much of the discussion Monday night was focused on the synagogue's contention that the parking improvement is necessary to its continued viability on its 7.8-acre campus.

A finding that the relief is essential to preservation of the historic structures is required if the temple is to achieve a bonus for impervious cover permitted under Lower Merion's Historic Resource Overlay District zoning.

Under an old approval, the temple has been permitted to use an area in the front yard on Remington Road for overflow parking during high holidays and special events. In recent years, use of synagogue facilities has "intensified," former temple president Lewis Gantman told planners, so that parking exceeds what is available in the existing 80-space paved lot on an almost weekly basis. As a result, the lawn parking area is now compacted, bare dirt that turns into a mud field in wet weather, on occasion leaving members to call tow trucks to pull their vehicles out.

Putting the situation in the bluntest terms, Gantman said the congregation does not want to move, but "if we are not successful with this application" the options are not many; parking would either continue without improved landscaping and stormwater management, the temple might have to look at taking down buildings to put in a parking structure, or it might have to leave.

Neighbors contend that cars are often parked on the lawn for convenience while spaces go empty in the paved lot, and the deteriorated tree and lawn conditions are a self-inflicted wound.

Planners were generally willing to concede that the parking lot may be needed. More troublesome was the synagogue's request for "flexibility" in the historic preservation covenant that the township would require in exchange for the boost in impervious cover.

The temple has proposed a covenant that would allow the manor house and gatehouse to be relocated if needed for future development, and the potential demolition of the synagogue's modernist sanctuary building, if the property is sold and its reuse is not possible.

Such an arrangement is unprecedented in the township. In fact, Building and Planning Director Bob Duncan said he is not certain the township is authorized to approve a covenant that saves some of the historic structures but not all. Gantman pointed out that, with their existing Class 2 designation, the buildings could be demolished after a delay.

In a 4-1 vote, the commission recommended approval with the elimination of 13 parking spaces closest to Remington Road – Co-Chairman Robert Gray would have preferred 30, but synagogue representatives said they would not go ahead with the project with that much of a loss – and with a firm stand that the covenant must apply to all three historic resources. Commission member Charles Howland cast the "no" vote.

Wyoming Avenue townhouses

While township officials have shared neighbors' concerns that the 14-unit development is too dense and out of scale and character with the neighborhood, they approved a **tentative sketch plan** last October, considering the Hardy Houder Real Estate Group's application a by-right plan under Wyoming Avenue's R-6A zoning.

A primary issue moving to the preliminary plan phase was how sewer service would be provided to the townhomes, which are to sit behind the twin houses where the parcel slopes down to Holland Avenue. One option was to install individual pump systems in the townhouses, but by this week, the developer had reportedly reached a "handshake" deal with the adjoining Infiniti dealership owner for an easement to connect with the Holland Avenue sewers.

Architecture of the new homes has been another major concern. Elevations provided this week showed features intended to add interest to the townhouse facades, but because the plan is virtually at the impervious surface limit, the developer was still asking for leeway not to provide full porches across the fronts of the twin houses. Full porches might also block or reduce light to the homes' basement and first-floor levels, it is concerned.

While two neighbors raised questions about underground contamination from the former Talone's dry-cleaning business on the Infiniti property which might affect at least two of the townhouses, township engineer Kevin Bowers said environmental reports indicated that the only measure recommended, out of an excess of caution developer Charlie Houder said, was to provide a vapor barrier in the units.

Commission members voted unanimously to recommend approval, but with the condition for full front porches, unless the developer can demonstrate that they are not feasible.

Palmer Theological Seminary

To move forward the apartment project, favored because it preserves the now Class 1 main seminary building – originally designed by Horace Trumbauer as an elegant Main Line hotel resort – and the later chapel building, the developer, C16E Lancaster Avenue Associates, is seeking conditional use approval on a set of issues.

First, in a different take on the impervious cover bonus for historic preservation, the developer is seeking approval for an increase to meet the parking requirement for the planned 132 apartment units, but wants to hold 50 of the 246 spaces in reserve. Because 100 of the apartments will be one-bedroom units and the property is close to public transit, planners agreed they likely will not be needed.

There was more concern about how the developer can meet the goals of open space preservation for the 7.6-acre parcel while not setting aside the 50-percent of open space required for lots of more than five acres.

Aaron pointed out that, under Lower Merion's ordinance, preservation of the historic buildings counts toward that requirement. The apartment conversion will also come with an extensive, improved landscaping plan for the remaining green space.

Planning commission members acknowledged that the typical set-aside is not possible, but said goals could be met if the developer provides an open space plan for maintenance of the landscaping and existing green areas. In creating that plan, they encouraged the developer to recognize the two different types of open space on the parcel: the historically more formal landscaping of the front of the former hotel grounds, and the more "naturalistic" appearance of the open areas to the rear of the buildings.

The board of commissioners was to hold the conditional use hearing on the Palmer application Wednesday night. Aaron said, if approved, the next step would be to bring forward land development plans for the apartment project a little later this spring.

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