

L.M. Historical Commission Considering Redevelopment of Palmer Seminary

The township's Historical Commission met yesterday, but a rezoning decision won't be final until at least August.

By [Thomas J. Walsh](#) | [Email the author](#) | May 27, 2011



Thursday's agenda for the [Lower Merion Township Historical Commission](#) included information on the possible \$30 million redevelopment of the Palmer Theological Seminary, on Lancaster Avenue at City Avenue in Wynnewood.

The developer, [Cross Properties](#) of Center City, which would like to convert the historic, Horace Trumbauer-designed building into 130-plus apartments. Before that happens, the Historical Commission must consider changing its underlying zoning to an upgraded "Class 1" designation.

"Rezoning will be considered for adoption by the Board of Commissioners on June 8th," said Bob Duncan, the township's director of building and planning. "At some later time this summer, the actual application for Class 1 designation would come before the Historical Commission, probably in a special meeting in August."

"Lower Merion is supply constrained, with strict zoning and very little available land zoned for multifamily," Cross Properties wrote in an executive summary of the project published in August 2010. "Strong demand exists for housing in Lower Merion, with a vacancy rate of 4.39 percent (60 percent below the national average)."

The final sale of the property, at 6 Lancaster Avenue, is understood to be contingent upon the Historical Commission's nod of approval for the zoning change. Current zoning for the Palmer

property permits only single-family homes, and not apartments, noted Scott Kalner, writing in the Merion Civic Association's Spring 2011 newsletter.

"While the R-7 zoning being sought by the developer seems both logical and consistent with the existing surrounding properties, the major concern for the township is that the changed zoning also permits much taller structures than what is currently on the site," Kalner wrote.

Kalner, chair of the [Lower Merion Historical Architectural Review Board](#) (HARB) and an adjunct professor at Widener University, is optimistic about the project. He called it a "historic preservation success story," provided the developer follows through on its plans to protect the landmark building, which opened in 1922 as the Green Hill Farms Hotel. Trumbauer's building is "a well-executed example of neo-colonial design," Kalner says.

In the executive summary of the development, Cross anticipated that historic tax credits would "allow for a recovery of 25 percent of construction costs," adding that it has "significant prior experience" with those kinds of tax credits.

To obtain federal tax credits, the building must be listed—or deemed eligible for listing—on the National Register of Historic Places, Kalner explained.

"The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission ([PHMC](#)) is the state agency responsible for making that determination, and it has recently identified the building as eligible for National Register listing," he wrote.

Kenneth Aaron, former chair of Lower Merion's Zoning Hearing Board, is the attorney representing Cross Properties and the official new owners of the building, a partnership based in West Conshohocken. Kalner says that Aaron is working with the [Lower Merion Conservancy](#) to grant a preservation easement, which would protect the property.

Palmer Theological Seminary, formerly Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, was founded in 1925 and moved to Wynnewood in 1940 from its former home on Rittenhouse Square in Center City. A part of Eastern University in St. Davids, Palmer is moving its operations to the main campus there.