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Lower Merion commissioners approve rezoning for Palmer

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When Lower Merion commissioners approved rezoning of the Palmer Theological Seminary property for conversion of the 1919 building as an apartment complex, it was with the strongly-voiced desire to see that historic structure permanently protected.

The developers of the project took an important step forward in that process this week. At a meeting of the township's historical commission Tuesday, they received a unanimous recommendation for approval of their request to upgrade the property's status as a Lower Merion historical resource to Class 1.

The main seminary building, built in the early years of the last century as the Green Hill Farms Hotel and designed by preeminent Philadelphia architect Horace Trumbauer, is currently listed as a Class 2 resource, meaning that it could be demolished after a maximum 90-day delay.

Class 1 status means that it could only be taken down with permission from the board of commissioners. It is the strongest protection provided by Lower Merion's Historic Preservation Ordinance.

In the application, a development partnership, C1 6# Lancaster Ave. Associates, also requested that the later chapel building, dating from 1951, be given Class 1 status. It is not currently listed on the township's historic inventory.

Palmer Theological Seminary, associated with Eastern University, plans to move its programs to the university's campus in St. Davids.

Under that scenario, the development proposal to preserve the buildings while converting them into a complex of up to 133 apartments, has been welcomed by the township as a win-win solution. After a public hearing in May, the board of commissioners approved rezoning of the eight-acre parcel at the intersection of City and Lancaster avenues in Wynnewood from lower-density residential to R-7, permitting multifamily residential. Several adjoining parcels had previously been rezoned R-7.

The development partnership, led by partner David Blumenthal, had already begun a process to have the Pennsylvania Museum and Historical Commission determine that the seminary buildings are eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, a finding that would make it eligible to receive tax credits. National Register eligibility is one criterion for Class 1 listing in the township.

Final action by the state commission is expected in October.

In making its recommendation this week, the township's commission had no hesitation about raising the status of the

main seminary building, which operated as a luxurious country retreat and hotel from 1919 until 1939, when it was acquired by the then Eastern Baptist Seminary, the precursor of Eastern University.

Members of the commission asked for some more explanation of the historic qualifications of the previously-unlisted chapel building, erected in 1951.

Bob Powers, a historic preservation consultant to the development partnership, said that there are reasons the chapel also is historically significant. As the seminary grew to become a center of the Baptist fundamentalist and evangelical movement in the region, the chapel building was its own distinctive mark on the property, he explained.

In addition, the building, designed by architect William Harold Lee, has architectural significance, he argued. Lee, who practice in the area in the early- to mid-20th century, was known primarily as a theater architect, having designed both the Anthony Wayne Theater in Wayne and Bryn Mawr's Seville Theater, among more than 200 such buildings. The chapel at Palmer Theological Seminary is his only known church building design, Powers said.

The only other question that arose had to do with a boundary line shown on a drawing presented by the developers, which they had indicated marked the historic resource. It was drawn closely around the main seminary and chapel buildings.

Kenneth Aaron, the attorney representing the development partnership, pointed out that a part of the property to the northwest of the Trumbauer building is situated below grade and is currently used as a parking lot. Aaron said there might be some future development of that area as part of the apartment complex.

Historical Commission Chairman Christian Busch said, however, that in designating a resource as Class 1, the township has consistently designated the entire property on which it sits, to protect its historic character. If the developers at some future time wished to pursue development or changes on that parking lot portion, Busch said they would need to return to the commission for consideration of the potential impact on the historic character of the property, as in any other property under its review.

The upgrade in historic status of the seminary property now will go to the board of commissioners for review in September.

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