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Palmer Seminary, Ardmore home are historic preservation wins in Lower Merion

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It has been a good month for historic preservation in Lower Merion.

Township commissioners last week finalized a vote to grant conditional use approval on two applications, one for a major landmark and the other for one of the distinctive homes that led character to township neighborhoods.

In the first case, the new owners of the Palmer Theological Seminary at City and Lancaster avenues in Wynnewood have been working, step by step, to gain the layers of approval necessary to convert the historic main building and later chapel to an apartment complex of 132 units.

Cross Properties, which has experience with adaptive reuse of historic structures in Philadelphia, has already obtained a zoning change to permit multi-family housing on the eight-acre parcel. Last year, it obtained listing on the National Register of Historic Places and upgraded the buildings to Class 1 status under Lower Merion's Historic Preservation ordinance.

The main seminary building, designed by architect Horace Trumbauer, started life in 1919 as the Green Hill Farm Hotel, an elegant summer escape for Philadelphians.

While retaining the exterior features of the two buildings and bringing back amenities such as the swimming pool that hotel guests once enjoyed and new landscaping recalling the resort's gardens, the conditional use approval process will allow the developer to use an incentive of the township's ordinance. It will be able to increase impervious surface on the site by up to 15 percent to meet parking requirements of the new apartments, but plans to hold 50 of those parking spaces in reserve to preserve green space.

By approving the request, the township also will not require the property to be developed under provisions of its Open Space Preservation District ordinance, which would typically require 50 percent of the parcel to be set aside as open space. Cross Properties has agreed, however, to provide a maintenance and operations plan to ensure that the new landscaping plan is sustainable.

The conditional use approval clears the way for the developer to move forward with the apartment plans into the land development approval process.

The property in the second case may not be as imposing as Trumbauer's grand hotel, but it is regarded as a significant success in preserving the historic character of one of the township's established neighborhoods.

The large white-stuccoed house with its signature square tower at 105 Ardmore Ave. is recognizable to anyone who has visited the Ardmore Library directly across the street. Built between 1877 and 1881, it is one in a line of large Victorian homes in that part of Ardmore Avenue, many of which have been divided into apartments over the years. The house at 105 Ardmore is no exception. It currently contains two apartment units.

It is currently listed as a Class 2 historic resource, meaning that it could be demolished after a maximum 90-day delay.

What is exceptional is that the recent purchasers, Kerry DeAngelis and Dr. Kathy L. Rumer, plan to convert it back into a single-family residence, using portions of the first and second floor as their home. Through conditional use approval, they would be able to take advantage of an incentive of the Historic Preservation Ordinance and use a portion of the first floor as a home occupation; in this case, as a medical office for Rumer, a plastic and reconstructive surgeon.

In consideration of approval, the owners would place restrictive covenants on the façade of the building, providing it with a level of protection its Class 2 status does not convey.

In a hearing before township Hearing Officer Pamela Loughman last month, Rumer testified that she would see patients pre- and post-operatively at the office, between the hours of 9 a.m. and 9 p.m., two to three days per week, with less than eight patient visits per day. No surgery would be performed there. There would be one other office employee.

Rumer said she plans to rehabilitate and restore the house and property, taking such steps as replacing shutters that were removed. Parking spaces would be reduced from an existing seven to six, with two spaces remaining in the front yard and four to the rear, with new landscaping to screen parking areas.

When the conditional use approval was up for a vote by the board's Building and Planning Committee March 14, Assistant Director of Planning Chris Leswing said that, rather than increasing commercial uses in that part of Ardmore Avenue, the owners' proposal would "actually reduce commercialization."

The plan to revert back to a single-family home also is seen as an encouraging reversal of a trend, in which the township has seen parcels in transitional R-6A zoning districts such as this being acquired and consolidated and older homes demolished for more intense redevelopment.

After the loss of the architectural marvel that was the La Ronda mansion to newer tastes, there had been much concern that Lower Merion's historic preservation ordinance does not do enough to encourage preservation and reuse.

"This is a striking example of how our historic preservation ordinance works," commented board President Liz Rogan before the committee vote.

"This is a superb project. The incentive we have is working," remarked Commissioner Scott Zelov.

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