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## Palmer Seminary's Conversion to Apartments Is One Step Closer

Cross Properties' plan calls for 132 apartments to be constructed in Palmer Seminary's main building and chapel.

By [Amanda Mahnke](#) | [Email the author](#) | May 10, 2012

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Developers are now one step closer to converting [Palmer Seminary's building and chapel](#), located at the intersection of Lancaster and City Avenue in Wynnewood, into an apartment complex. On Wednesday night, the Building and Planning Committee of the Lower Merion Board of Commissioners unanimously recommended approval of Cross Properties' preliminary plans, which call for the construction of 132 apartments, a pool and a patio on the 7.6 acre seminary property.

Of the property's 132 units, 100 will be one-bedroom apartments, said Kenneth Aaron of Weir & Partners, representing the applicant. The residents of the apartment complex, which Aaron anticipates to be largely post-college-age young adults, will also be encouraged to use public transit and shuttles that will run from the apartment to popular destinations like [Lankenau Hospital](#) or [Whole Foods](#).

The preliminary plan approval comes with a number of conditions. Two contested conditions that the committee approved at Wednesday's meeting were that:

- **The developers must pay \$148,354.39 to the township** as a "fee in lieu of" designating a requisite 15 percent of the property "dedicated recreational space." Dedicated recreational space is part of a property that is only used for recreational purposes, and the developers of the Palmer property are required to designate 15 percent of the property's square footage as such, or pay a fee in lieu of doing so. Cross Properties' plan calls for 8.26 percent of the property to be dedicated recreational space, comprised of a pool and patio area and indoor fitness area. The \$148,354 figure represents the remaining 6.74 percent.
- The developers **must remove one of three Lancaster Avenue curb cuts** (driveways) to create more green space on the corridor. The particular driveway to be removed will be determined in conjunction with the township engineer based on safety and traffic issues, but the right-turn only driveway closest to City Avenue was suggested as a possibility.

### Recreational Space Disputes

Aaron asked the committee at Wednesday night's meeting to allow the three curb cuts to remain for the "most beneficial circulation of traffic," and to allow a reserve parking area space to fulfill the dedicated recreational space requirement.

The current plan calls for 1.5 parking spaces per unit to be paved, and the space for an additional .5 spaces per unit be retained in case it is determined in the future that additional parking is needed.

The reserve parking area, located in the southwest portion of the property, will have the current gravel surface gravel removed and will be reseeded,

and so could be used as a recreational space until it's determined—if it ever is—that more parking is needed, Aaron said.

Because most of the apartments will be one-bedroom dwellings and residents will be encouraged to use public transportation, "it's highly unlikely we're going to put parking spaces on that site," Aaron said.

No commissioners disputed using the space as a recreational area, but township solicitor Gil High and several commissioners, including Scott Zelov, were leery of counting the reserve parking area toward the dedicated recreational space requirement.

"The recreational fee is an important issue," Zelov said. "... I don't think we want to begin setting a precedent in this case. This is space that is reserve parking and not a recreational facility, and I don't think it should be considered as such. ... I think a fee in lieu of is appropriate here."

Commissioner Philip Rosenzweig disagreed, stating that it was reasonable to allow this space to count toward the dedicated recreational space requirement until it is determined that the additional parking is needed, at which point, the "fee in lieu of" would be due.

Board president Liz Rogan made a motion to approve the fee in lieu of, which was ultimately approved, along with the condition of removing one of the three driveways.

## A Long Time Coming

The committee voted unanimously to approve Cross Property's preliminary plan (subject to a series of conditions), which will go before the full board for approval on Wednesday, May 16.

"We're pleased," Aaron told Patch on Thursday. "That was our mission. ... We started a long time ago on a long, difficult process that had lots of opportunities for complications. Overall, it was a rather smooth process and the township was highly cooperative."

This was the fourth step of a process that included a zoning change from R3 to R7, a historical category change, and a conditional use hearing, Aaron said.

The developers hope to present the final plan to township staff within the next few months, according to Aaron.

## Palmer's Plans

Palmer Seminary's 7.6 acre property has two buildings: Laws Chapel, built in 1951, and Palmer Hall, built in 1919, which was originally a hotel before the seminary moved to the property in 1940. Currently, the space contains classrooms, meeting rooms, and a number of apartments, many rented by seminary students.

The seminary will stay on its Wynnewood property until December, according to Dean Chris Hall, at which point it will move to a temporary home at the American Baptist Church Mission Center in Valley Forge. In three years, it will move to a new \$10 million building on the campus of Eastern University, an affiliated school, Hall said.