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Testimony gets tense

By: Kyle Schulz , Staff Writer

The proposed West Oak Lane Church of God along Ashbourne Road will have a "negative impact on the health, safety and welfare" of the community, according to testimony at a Cheltenham zoning hearing June 15.

Stuart Appel, president of Wells Appel Land Strategies, testified on behalf of the protestants that the construction of the 125,000-square-foot church is in contrast to the township's Montgomery County Comprehensive Plan which is designed to control sprawl, traffic congestion and to preserve open space and natural areas within the community. Advertisement

According to Appel, the proposed church would destroy wetlands surrounding the site by cutting off most of the natural runoff that feeds the wetlands.

Appel said with 70 percent of natural runoff proposed to be stored in underground pipes, the wetlands, as well as other vegetation, could dry up and die.

Appel further testified the church had not met the township's 25 percent Green Area requirement, and that future, fine-tuning of plans for the site such as bus turning radii and trash trucks will further decrease the amount of Green Area.

Marc Jonas, a representative for the church, became furious and told the board the Cheltenham commissioners had already approved the site last year for the church's use.

Jonas accused Appel's testimony as "trying to attack the legislative wisdom of the township."

"If we don't put our arms and fences around this, they'll be no limits to this testimony," Jonas said.

Appel countered that that the protestants aren't opposed to a church's use of the site, but rather the extent of the use.

According to Appel, because the church plans include a bowling alley, theater, studio and gym, the facility is out of character with most religious institutions.

"The primary use of this facility is not religious," Appel said, and added that about 18 percent of the building will be used for religious purposes.

Parking continued to be an issue at last week's hearing.

According to Appel, the church's proposed use of off-street parking "flies in the face of traffic management and smart growth goals of the township."

Appel cited 26 out of 27 townships in Eastern Montgomery County that prohibit off-street parking, and said Cheltenham is the only township of that group that permits 60 percent of the required off-street parking to be within three miles of the site.

Cheltenham's zoning code previously required parking to be within a reasonable distance of the building and on the same lot, but when West Oak Lane Church of God purchased the Asbourne Road site two years ago, the code was amended to permit remote, off-street parking, according to Appel.

Jonas, however, didn't see the relevance of this testimony to the church's application.

"Twenty-six other townships have nothing to do with the legislation the commissioners already made," Jonas said.

Upon cross-examination from Jonas, Appel admitted the proposed church does not exceed building area requirements for the district, and that the Montgomery County Comprehensive Plan Appel referred to is merely advisory and not binding.

Hearings will continue at 7:30 p.m. Aug. 7 at Curtis Hall, Greenwood Avenue and Church Road in Wyncote.