

Palmer Seminary buildings' new owner seeks rezoning for apartments

By Cheryl Allison

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It has had different names over the years, but since 1939 the eight-acre parcel at the prominent corner of City and Lancaster avenues in Wynnewood has been home to a seminary training students for the ministry or theological studies in the Baptist and other denominations.

Now Palmer Theological Seminary, associated with Eastern University, is preparing to move most of its programs to Eastern's St. Davids campus, and a developer with whom it has entered into a sales agreement has a plan to convert its historic main hall into a 132-unit apartment building.

Lower Merion Township has received a rezoning petition for the property that calls for the current R-3 residential zoning to be amended to R-7.

The R-3 zoning designation generally permits single-family homes while R-7 permits multi-family residential development such as an apartment building.

Planning staff outlined the request briefly for the board of commissioners in January and presented it to the township's planning commission Monday night as an information item.

For the proposal to move forward, the board of commissioners must schedule a public hearing, action that its Building and Planning Committee was expected to consider Wednesday night. April 20 is proposed for the hearing and possible adoption of a zoning-map amendment.

Under the apartment proposal, it is anticipated the 1919 Horace Trumbauer-designed main building, now known as Palmer Hall, would be retained and converted to apartment use. The seminary's Curtis Lee Laws Memorial Chapel, built in 1951, could be converted to office use.

According to the petition, a partnership operating as C1 6E Lancaster Avenue Associates of West Conshohocken has entered into an agreement to buy the seminary if the zoning is changed.

The partnership is being represented by attorney Kenneth Aaron of Weir & Partners, who recently stepped down after many years as

chairman of Lower Merion's Zoning Hearing Board.

"There are formalities that have to happen for it to go through, but there are plans for the seminary, for the most part, to move to the St. Davids campus," said Randy Frame, executive director of marketing and communications for Palmer Seminary.

With plans for some new construction on that campus, the seminary's programs can be accommodated in St. Davids, Frame said. But he said the seminary wants to "maintain some presence in Wynnewood."

"Many of our students come from Philadelphia," he said. "We want to make sure if and when, at whatever point we would relocate, we want to have a presence that is accessible" to those students. That might happen if the seminary can lease back the chapel for offices and classes.

Frame said Palmer Theological Seminary has about 330 students in master of divinity and master of theological studies programs. It also has about 15 students enrolled in a doctoral program but that is not a residential program. About 100 students come to the seminary for non-degree programs.

The first floor of the four-story building is used for classrooms and offices while the upper three floors are a student residence hall.

What was then known as Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary bought the Wynnewood property in 1939, moving from Philadelphia.

It occupied a building that was designed by noted architect Trumbauer for Charles Morris Wood as the Green Hill Farms Hotel and Apartments in 1919. The parcel had originally been part of the 300-acre Green Hill Farm.

Located just a 12-minute train ride on the Main Line of the Pennsylvania Railroad from the city, the hotel was a vacation destination offering "upscale guest rooms and first-class dining," according to background information in the petition. It also offered what might have been called a golf package; the hotel was next to what was then the Overbrook Golf Club (now Lankenau Hospital), where guests could enjoy rounds of golf and horseback riding.

In 1951 Eastern Baptist Seminary established a separate college on the Wharton Estate in St. Davids, later known as Eastern College and finally Eastern University. In 2005 the seminary's name was changed to Palmer Theological Seminary.

Today the seminary property is bounded on the north by Lankenau Hospital's campus, zoned as a medical center district, and on the west by the Saunders House nursing-home property, zoned R-7.

The corner parcel on which the seminary sits is the only R-3-zoned parcel remaining in the area. As Lower Merion Building and Zoning Director Bob Duncan noted Monday night, the chance that the property would be developed with single-family homes on R-3's required 10,000-square-foot lots is "probably pretty remote." Another institutional use, under a special exception, is more likely the other use that might be permitted under existing zoning.

In its petition, the property's new equitable owner said an apartment building is an "appropriate use" in an R-7 district and would be "consistent with the historic use."

The requested rezoning would not affect the zoning of any neighboring properties, according to the petition, but rather "merely extends the adjoining pre-existing R-7 residential zone" of the Saunders House property.

If the rezoning is considered, Duncan said, Lancaster Avenue could be considered "a logical breaking point" for R-7 zoning in that area.

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