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New owner, new chance for preservation of Ardmore's First Baptist Church

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It was the first local landmark that got Lower Merion Township thinking seriously about changing its rules for reuse of older church and club buildings, many of which were falling vacant or going up for sale for development as congregations and memberships declined.

When a developer purchased the 1923 First Baptist Church of Ardmore in 2012 with a plan for a condominium conversion, the community around that corner of Athens Avenue and St. Paul's Road was encouraged. With no historic preservation protection, it might have been demolished and several new houses might have been built on the acre it shares with a parsonage, while a keystone of community history would have been lost. The church has been listed as a priority structure on the Lower Merion Conservancy's Preservation Watch List for the past three years.

With an ordinance for multi-family residential conversion made law almost 18 months ago, however, the gray stone Gothic Revival building has continued to sit vacant, while owner Wally Smerconish made it clear he was willing to sell.

Now its reuse as condominium units is poised to move forward again, under new ownership.

In an interview Monday with Main Line Media News, Mac Brand, a partner in the renovation-minded development group Main Line rebuild, said it recently signed an agreement of sale with Smerconish.

That is the same group, including partners Scott Brehman and Tom Harvey, that has purchased and is at work on a project on the United Methodist Church of Narberth property.

The partners, all award-winners for previous renovations of older and historic homes on the Main Line, is also pursuing a plan to restore and convert the neighboring Odd Fellows Hall and Gladwyne Methodist Church in Gladwyne Village. The Gladwyne project, which recently received a recommendation of approval from Lower Merion's planning commission, is the subject this week of continuing conditional use hearing under the conversion ordinance.

Brand said Main Line reBuild, formerly Main Line Realty Investors, had been considering adding the Ardmore church to its portfolio. "It was all a matter of timing," she said.

"Narberth Place," which includes conversion of the main church building into six units taking advantage of distinctive architectural features, three units in the adjacent Barrie House parsonage, and construction of a three-unit townhouse building designed to resemble a late 19th-century "manor" house, is proceeding. Brand said the townhouses and Barrie House are expected to be delivered to buyers by the end of 2014; conversion of the church should wrap up by late summer 2015. "We already have five out of the 12 units under agreement" with buyers, and there is "great interest" in the

church units, she said.

If approved by Lower Merion, Brand said the Gladwyne project, which includes construction of two new single-family homes and a total six units in Odd Fellows Hall, the church and its twin-home parsonage, with consolidation of the properties' two cemeteries under a care plan, would be finishing up in early 2016.

"It was time to look at another project," Brand said of Main Line reBuild's interest in the Ardmore church. The partnership is particularly interested in repurposing such older, cherished buildings for residential use.

Brand said an architect has already taken a preliminary look at First Baptist. Smerconish had proposed four, two-story townhouse-style units in the church, with the parsonage making up the fifth unit in a condominium arrangement. Main Line reBuild's early ideas would include the same number of units, with two units in the sanctuary portion of the church and two taking up the community area of the 10,000-square-foot structure.

The church today has just one off-street parking space at the parsonage. He would have added more required spaces in a parking area near that building, with additional spaces in the front yard of the two units with frontage on St. Paul's Road.

Brand said the partnership is looking, instead, at creating parking for perhaps six or seven cars in the basement of the church, similar to what it is doing in the Narberth church building. Two other parking spaces would be provided in a garage attached to the parsonage.

In Narberth, where the borough council also adopted an ordinance to facilitate residential conversion of older institutional buildings, Brand said work on the Methodist Church plans benefited from many conversations with the borough's planning commission.

She would like to see a similar process take place in Ardmore, working with neighbors in the community.

"The next thing is to sit down and have a discussion with neighbors," she said, "to show them what we are contemplating and how [their suggestions] might improve what we are doing."

"Once we have done that, we will submit plans to the township," Brand added.

Under requirements of Lower Merion's conversion ordinance, any project would be subject to conditional use approval as well as land development approval by the board of commissioners, as in the Gladwyne project.

Another prerequisite would be adding the First Baptist Church to Lower Merion's Historic Resource Inventory and placing a covenant on the property to generally preserve its historic exterior, lending it protection that it does not have today.

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