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# First Baptist Church of Ardmore condo conversion moving forward

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With a new owner and a new plan, the First Baptist Church of Ardmore is moving forward again toward a new life.

Development partnership Main Line reBuild, which went to settlement Sept. 3 on the property at Athens Avenue and St. Paul's Road, was before the Lower Merion Historical Commission Sept. 22 with a plan for residential conversion of the 1923 church.

While more details of architectural modifications will be presented in a follow-up meeting next month, the commission voted unanimously to recommend approval in concept of Main Line reBuild's conditional use application and preliminary plan of land development.

It also voted to recommend approval of adding the property to Lower Merion's Historical Resource Inventory as a Class 2 resource. Listing the property for historic preservation protection is a requirement under Lower Merion's 2013 church conversion ordinance.

"I think this is one of the only chances for this building to survive," commission Chairman Christian Busch said of the plan.

When the church and its 1953 parsonage on just about one acre went up for sale three years ago, it captured attention as an emblem of a regional and national trend of older church and civic buildings, landmarks in their residential neighborhoods, whose congregations or memberships had dwindled and could no longer support their maintenance. In cases like the First Baptist Church, which had no preservation protection, demolition and redevelopment was a likely outcome.

In 2012, a developer, Wally Smerconish of Haverford, stepped forward to purchase the Ardmore church, with the intention to convert it into condominium units, but there were no existing provisions in Lower Merion's zoning code to permit the change of use. Over many months, township commissioners worked to adopt a conversion ordinance for historic religious and club buildings. Meanwhile, neighboring Narberth Borough, seeing the same trend, adopted its own form of conversion ordinance for such characteristic buildings.

Neighbors were supportive of Smerconish's early plans, but the developer never brought them forward for formal township review. In June, Main Line reBuild, a partnership of award-winning renovators Mac Brand, Scott Brehman and Tom Harvey, announced it had reached an agreement of sale with Smerconish for the First Baptist property. It is the same group, formed around a mission of finding adaptive reuse for sometimes threatened historic buildings, that purchased and is in the process of converting the United Methodist Church of Narberth and Gladwyne Methodist Church and neighboring Odd Fellows Hall in Gladwyne Village.

The partnership's plans for the Ardmore church project, which it has named The Arbors at Athens, call for the same number of units – four within the church building, with the single-family parsonage as a fifth unit – as Smerconish's plan. In an important change, however, the developers plan to locate parking for the church units in the building's basement, accessed by a driveway from St. Paul's Road.

At the meeting this week, the commission focused on a few threshold issues of the conversion plan. Those included whether the property met criteria for inclusion on the historic inventory, whether the parking plan was appropriate, and, among architectural issues, guidance on the treatment of new roof dormers that will be needed to provide light and egress access for bedrooms on a new upper floor in the church sanctuary.

To be eligible for listing, properties must meet three of nine criteria. Busch said it was determined that the First Baptist Church meets seven.

In contrast to Smerconish's plan, which called for new driveway parking for units on the St. Paul's Road frontage, commission members agreed with Busch that Main Line reBuild's proposal for underground parking is "the most appropriate response we have seen to date."

The commission also agreed, however, that the new roof dormer, as shown in current architectural plans, is too "monolithic" and needs more work. An Ardmore neighbor, former commission member Jean Wolf, also called the feature "a little more structural and dramatic" than expected. The dormer, along with treatment of some of the existing stained-glass windows, will be a topic for discussion when the plan comes back for more review at a historical commission meeting Oct. 27.

Meanwhile, aspects of the proposed church conversion will move forward for several other levels of review in the next three months. First up will be review of the application for placement on the Historic Resource Inventory and a recommendation on conditional use and preliminary plan approval by the township's planning commission Oct. 6.

The board of commissioners will also consider scheduling a public hearing on the inventory amendment for Nov. 19. A conditional use hearing, required by the conversion ordinance, could also take place in late November, followed by a decision and preliminary plan review in December.

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