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### The Arbors at Athens

ARDMORE >> Lower Merion commissioners closed out 2014 by approving development plans for key sites in two township communities.

In their final meeting of the year Dec. 17, commissioners voted unanimously to grant conditional use approval, following up with approval of preliminary plans of land development, for residential conversion of the 1923 First Baptist Church of Ardmore and for a major new mixed-use development on the former Verizon lot in Bryn Mawr.

Preliminary plan is the last stage during which development proposals come before the township board for public review and action. In the next phase, township building and planning staff and the township engineer will review a final plan.

The word that came up in both cases to describe the projects was “exciting.”

When the First Baptist Church of Ardmore property of just about an acre at 120 E. Athens Ave. 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 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.

Recognition that Lower Merion could lose several of these iconic buildings led the board of commissioners, over many months, to draft and adopt an ordinance permitting adaptive reuse as residential units, at the same time requiring that the structures would be listed on the township’s Historic Resource Inventory and that façade easements would be placed to preserve their historic character.

With last week’s board actions, the plan for the Ardmore church becomes the second application in the township approved under the ordinance, following approval of plans for conversion and some new construction on the Gladwyne Methodist Church and Odd Fellows Hall properties in Gladwyne Village.

The developer in both instances is Main Line reBuild, a partnership of three experienced renovators, Mac Brand, Scott Brehman and Tom Harvey. Main Line reBuild is also the owner and developer of a similar project to convert the former United Methodist Church of Narberth parcel. They have named the Ardmore project The Arbors at Athens.

In the case of the First Baptist Church of Ardmore, the gray stone Gothic Revival church with its signature bell tower and its 1950s parsonage had initially been purchased by a different developer, who also planned to divide the church building into condominium units but never brought the project forward for formal review. The Main Line reBuild partners purchased the property this summer and over the past six months has proceeded under the ordinance to have it listed as a Class 2 resource on the inventory and bring its plans forward for review by the township's Historical Commission and the required conditional use hearing, obtaining a recommendation for approval from Hearing Officer Pamela Loughman.

The development plan calls for four two-story condominium units in the church building and keeping the parsonage as a fifth unit. A significant change from the first conversion proposal, which township officials saw as a major improvement, places parking for the church units in the building's basement, to be accessed via a new driveway from St. Paul's Road. A new front porch and two-car garage will be added to the parsonage.

To admit light to what will be new bedroom space in the upper portion of the church, the most significant architectural change will be the addition of dormers on both sides of the church roof. Through the use of complimentary materials, commissioners said the additions will be sympathetic and "subtle." Working with an expert in restoration of stained glass, Main Line reBuild will also replace religious symbols in some of the windows with clear and colored glass, but will leave the signature tall stained glass window on the East Athens Avenue façade intact.

"This project makes me happy," remarked Commissioner Cheryl Gelber, complimenting the developers for their "creativity" and noting that the result for the surrounding community could have been very different with demolition and construction of several new homes. Assistant Planning Director Chris Leswing agreed that reuse of the buildings under this plan is "a huge win-win for the community."