

Delay on town-house proposal gives Riverview chapel reprieve

By TERRI SANGINITI
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Wilmington planning commission members voted to wait at least a month to decide whether to approve a proposed expansion of the McMullen Square town-house project that would involve demolishing the landmark Riverview Cemetery chapel.

Developer Richard Julian says a portion of the building encroaches on his northeast Wilmington property, keeping him from adding a building to the 38-town-house project. After complaints from the community and objections by members of the commission, officials decided to look for an alternate resolution.

"We're going to table this for a month or so and see if there is some solution short of tearing this chapel down," said commission member William S. Mont-

gomery, Mayor James M. Baker's chief of staff.

Julian's plan called for subdividing the cemetery parcel in order to transfer a 0.059-acre parcel to McMullen Square.

The town-home complex is on the former site of DelSteel Inc., on a 1.6-acre property at 8 Eastlawn Ave. adjacent to the cemetery, now called Riverview Gardens. With the demolition of the chapel, the subdivision site would be larger than 2.5 acres, according to plans.

The two- and three-bedroom town houses, now under construction by Benchmark Homes, range in price from \$210,900 to \$240,900.

Julian said the cemetery's chapel, built in 1951, has not been maintained in recent years. It is owned by the Rev. Tom C. Davis, pastor of Restoration Christian Fellowship Church.

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The roof leaks so badly that it has destroyed the building's interior, and the basement has 2-3 feet of water. "It is not currently being used," Julian said. "It serves no useful purpose."

Davis did not attend the hearing. Julian would not say how much he planned to offer Davis for the property, which would be razed.

The root of the problem, he said, is that a large bank-style vault made of steel in the rear of the chapel is encroaching on the property his company bought.

Commission member Joe Chickadel questioned why that was not discovered earlier. "For 56 years, it sat there and nobody said anything," Chickadel

said. "It looks like you want to get the chapel."

Fellow commission member Bruce Brunozzi said he believes the problematic portion of the chapel could be removed. But Julian claimed the building is not only in disrepair, but contains asbestos that would have to be cleaned out.

About 35 relatives of people buried in the cemetery attended the hearing at the Louis L. Redding City/County Building, but were prohibited from speaking. Commission chairwoman Polly Weir said the session did not include a public hearing.

Paul Cathell, founder and president of the Delaware Medal of Honor Historical Association, addressed the com-

mission on their behalf, saying, "We're not 100 percent against the sale of the cemetery, we're 110 percent against it ... for someone to make a couple more bucks for one more house."

Funeral director Robert O. Wright, who operates nearby House of Wright Mortuary, also railed against the proposed demolition of the chapel.

"I don't think there's a need to disturb anything in that cemetery," Wright said.

The cemetery, established in 1873 by the Odd Fellows and Knights of Pythias, was turned over to Davis in 2003 after the former owners filed for bankruptcy.

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