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SpringPark residents oppose church  
Religious group to continue seeking site  
Jayne Noble Staff Writer of The Dallas Morning News

GARLAND - Hundreds of homeowners around the SpringPark addition have signed a petition opposed to The Church in Richardson moving into their neighborhood.

Other homeowners said that they want to learn more about the church and its practices before they give the organization their blessing. Church officials, who have a contract on a 6-acre lot currently zoned for recreational use, said that they are working to quell the concerns of area homeowners.

"I think there's a little fear of the unknown," said Jerry McGill, who said he leads services at the church's storefront chapel, 1701 Analog Drive in Richardson.

Mr. McGill, who described the church as evangelical, said he has met with some of the homeowners in recent weeks to explain the organization.

"Obviously, we didn't know the people in the neighborhood would have this opposition, but now we're kind of caught in the middle because we've put a contract down and spent about \$7,000 or \$8,000 to get this far," Mr. McGill said.

Mr. McGill said he was approached by several homeowners offering to pay the church the money it had spent to prepare the contract, but he said the church decided to go ahead with the purchase.

"We've heard a lot of positive response about this, we've heard from both different sides, and we've decided to go ahead with the purchase process," he said.

Council member Lee Smith, who lives in SpringPark, said he and other homeowners are concerned that the church might be affiliated with other churches around the country, including Austin and Arlington, whose members profess to follow a Chinese spiritual leader named Witness Lee.

"Everything I've read shows these churches could be cultish, and the people here are very concerned about that," Mr. Smith said.

Mr. McGill said that he is aware of the organization, which sometimes is called The Local Church and is named after the cities where services are held. But Mr. McGill said The Church in Richardson does not have any "official ties with any church."

"We have no central headquarters . . . no organizational leader or ties to anything," he said. "We're an independent, Bible-believing church with no affiliation . . . just like a lot of churches in Garland."

For many residents, the issue is one of zoning. Homeowners say they were told the property, a wooded lot at the corner of Jupiter Road and Springpark Way, always would be zoned for recreational purposes.

City officials estimate that about 500 residents from SpringPark and nearby neighborhoods have signed a petition opposing the city's decision to allow the church to move to the site of the SpringPark Health and Racquet Club. The club, which had been losing money, closed Jan. 1.

"Many of us would like to see a racket club remain at the site," said SpringPark resident Bob Smith, who signed the petition. "That's why we moved in."

City attorneys last week said that the church has a Constitutional right to move to the site, even though it is zoned for recreation.

"Churches have a right to build in any zoning district," City Attorney Charlie Hinton said.

In the past, when churches have wanted to move to property specifically zoned for something else, the city's Plan Commission has cast a vote to approve the change.

However, after Mr. Hinton's legal opinion, the commission agreed that it would not take a vote. Instead, the commission will approve only the church's site plan.

Church officials went before the Garland Plan Commission on Oct. 9 for site plan approval, but their request was tabled until Nov. 13 after about 200 residents attending the meeting opposed use of the property by a church.

"When it goes back to the Plan Commission, what we'll be reviewing is the detailed site plan," Director of Planning Neil Montgomery said.

The church must receive the city's approval for its site plan and meet city codes, such as parking and sanctuary size.

Council member Smith said the homeowners' association is researching similar zoning cases in Garland and other cities to see if there is any legal action that homeowners could take.

Mayor Jamie Ratliff said that he's heard from residents both for and against the church moving to SpringPark, which has about 800 homes.

"I'm getting mixed signals coming out of SpringPark," Mr. Ratliff said. "I think there's more opposition than positive, and I think for a lot of people it's that they want it kept recreational."

Bob Smith said he also was concerned that the church might be associated with The Local Church because of articles he had read on The Church in Austin.

"Some of the publications make that church appear to look a little bit strange," he said. "It's obviously a touchy issue, because when you're dealing with religion, our country was founded on the freedom of religion, and what may be strange to some may not be to another group."

Council member Smith and other residents said they probably would oppose any business or organization other than a tennis club on the property.

The site now has a 3,000-square-foot clubhouse, a swimming pool and 11 tennis courts. Mr. McGill said his church plans to fill in the swimming pool and pave over the tennis courts to build a parking lot for the congregation.

"We have about 200 adult members, so we'll have to expand the parking," Mr. McGill said. "We expect the largest number on Sunday morning, and maybe as many as 40 people attending Sunday and Wednesday evening prayer services."

Mr. McGill said the church also plans to have youth meetings on Saturday evenings.

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