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Residents fighting church  
Lawyer hired to halt a move to Garland  
Jayne Noble Staff Writer of The Dallas Morning News

GARLAND - Homeowners near the SpringPark addition have hired an attorney to fight plans by The Church in Richardson to move into their neighborhood.

Residents have asked Garland Plan Commission members to table the church's request for approval of its site plan for another 90 days. Church officials and Garland city attorney Charlie Hinton remain steadfast in their opinion that the church has a constitutional right to move onto the property, which is zoned for recreational use.

Church leader Jerry McGill said Tuesday he plans to present the commission with a site plan for six acres near the corner of SpringPark Way and Jupiter Road during its meeting Monday.

"We'll be there; we'll present what we're allowed to present," he said. "We're going to go through with the process. We don't have any intention at this point to back off."

The commission meeting, which is open to the public, begins at 7 p.m. in the City Council chambers at City Hall, 200 N. Fifth St.

The Church in Richardson, a fundamentalist Christian church, has a contract to purchase the site of the SpringPark Health and RacquetClub. The club, which had been losing money, closed Jan. 1.

The site 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. The clubhouse would be used for youth activities and the church would build a 20,000-square-foot sanctuary at the site.

The commission tabled the church's request for 30 days on Oct. 9 after attorneys said it could not legally vote on whether a church could move to a site zoned for recreation.

Mr. Hinton and Chris Caso, an Irving lawyer representing the 300-member Church in Richardson, told the commission that a church has a constitutional right to move in without approval from the commission.

The commission could only vote on the church's site plan, they said. The commission is scheduled to consider the site plan at Monday's meeting.

Art Anderson, a Dallas lawyer representing the SpringPark Homeowners Association, said that the commission has the right to vote on rezoning the property.

"Our position is that the application was filed by the church to change the zoning on the property," he said. "It should go through the same process as any other applicant."

But Mr. Hinton said a church is exempt from any such requirements because of the First Amendment, which allows freedom of religion.

"I can tell you I think he's {Mr. Anderson} dead wrong," Mr. Hinton said. More than 500 residents from the SpringPark neighborhood have signed a petition opposing the church move.

Some people say they are also concerned about the church's practices and its ties to other churches in Austin and Arlington, whose members profess to follow a Chinese spiritual leader named Witness Lee.

The churches are sometimes called Local Churches and are named after the cities where services are held.

Mr. McGill said this week that he has "had fellowship" with those churches, but that each is independent and that members "don't consider that the church, as the body of Christ, is an organization."

He said that the issue before the city is one of zoning, not of theology.

"We're not in this venue right now trying to defend our biblical views," he said. "We're looking at a land issue, a legal matter. Basically, we're a church trying to buy land and build a facility."

Many residents said they would prefer that the property remain zoned for recreational purposes.

Residential and business developers who have wanted to develop the property in the past have been persuaded by homeowners to look elsewhere to build, said City Council member Lee Smith, who lives in SpringPark and represents the area.

"People have come in asking for a change in zoning, but the homeowners association has been against it and they have backed off," Mr. Smith said.

Some residents said they fear increased traffic and overflow parking on streets if the church moves in.

"Traffic is very big concern, parking even more so," SpringPark resident Ken Robinson said recently.

At the October commission meeting, about 200 SpringPark residents filled City Hall to oppose the church's request, which was tabled. Residents said they plan to be back in the same numbers on Monday.

"I suspect that the meeting will be well-attended," Mr. Smith said. "About 90 percent of the homeowners {in the SpringPark addition} . . . signed the petition."

Mr. McGill said the church will probably not have many people at the meeting and said the church is prepared to wait if the issue is tabled again.

"We're not in a confrontational mood," he said. "If they want to fill the place again and claim another victory, that's fine."

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