

Demolition of historic Gaithersburg house still up for debate

Council, planning commission could decide fate in December

by Danielle E. Gaines | Staff Writer

The two-and-a-half story white house with neat black trim has stood at the corner of South Summit and South Frederick avenues for more than a century.

In June, Episcopal Church of the Ascension, 205 S. Summit Ave., filed a permit with the city asking to demolish the house to make room for parking.

Monday, church members and historians testified before the city council and planning commission for and against, respectively, the demolition of the 107-year-old house, which is currently being used for church outreach services.

The planning commission will accept additional testimony in writing through Nov. 22 and will discuss the issue at a meeting on Dec. 1. The city council will accept testimony until Dec. 2 and will discuss the issue Dec. 20.

The church wants to tear down the house to create 60 parking spaces near the main church building. Between 125 and 150 parking spaces are needed for Sunday services, according to a letter from the church, and the demolition is needed soon because a temporary parking lot will no longer be usable once construction begins at Gaithersburg High School.

Congregants have parked at Gaithersburg High School under an agreement with Montgomery County Public Schools since 1982, but plans to rebuild the high school on the parking lot site will make the school's new parking area inaccessible to the church.

Demolition requests for all properties more than 50 years old are sent to Gaithersburg's Historic District Commission for a recommendation of the site's historical significance. The commission recommended the house be declared historic and the demolition permit denied. The city council and planning commission asked the city manager to withhold the demolition permit in August and hold a public hearing on the matter instead.

Historians at the meeting argued that the house was an example of historical, cultural and architectural significance to the city.

Ascension House, also called Severance House, at 202 S. Summit Ave., was built by Rosa Blanche Fulks Severance and Frank B. Severance on land purchased from her parents, according to the Maryland Historical Trust. It was part of one of Gaithersburg's first subdivisions, Summit Park. The house and address were listed in 2003 Historic

Preservation Element of the city's master plan as a historic resource of note alongside Ascension Chapel, which was built in 1883 at 201 S. Summit Ave.

"As Christians, we empathize with members of the Historic District Committee as people who value antiquity. We find meaning in the past," the Rev. Randall Lord-Wilkinson said. "Not having our own dedicated parking lot or structure will jeopardize our ability to fulfill the mission we share with the larger church and, we have to believe, the leadership and people of Gaithersburg."

Jody S. Kline, an attorney speaking on behalf of the church, said the city may be in violation of the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act if it doesn't issue the demolition permit. That law was designed to protect the free exercise of religion and limits government's influence on a religious institution's use of their land