

Collections

Wanting To Be On History's Side Plans Are To Restore Several Historic Buildings And Incorporate Them Into The Churchill Project.

By Suzanne Gordon, Inquirer Staff Writer

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In 1715, there were 17 households in West Whiteland Township.

By 1730, the population had mushroomed to 130 - still less than 10 people a square mile.

Most lived on farms, spread around the countryside, with no real population center.

Among them was the Jacobs clan, a Quaker family that settled in the Perkiomen area and later bought several tracts of land that eventually became the core of the Church Farm School.

Today, the homes of John Jacobs and his sons Benjamin and John, and those of their early neighbors, are among the historic structures at 12 principal sites slated to become part of the controversial Churchill development, planned by the nationally known firm of Rouse & Associates for 1,500 acres of historic Chester County countryside.

Just how the sites will be used is not yet known. Rouse officials have said there will be "adaptative reuse" of the old properties. Their architectural consultants said the properties should be preserved along with a surrounding "area of significance."

But residents, fearing that increased traffic and new construction connected with the development will encroach on those properties, are taking a stand against Rouse's plan - from a historical perspective.

Sylvia Baker, chairwoman of the East Whiteland Historical Society, is expected to make a statement at tonight's hearing in East Whiteland - the first public hearing to be held by the township supervisors on the proposed Churchill development.

"We are worried about the impact of traffic and what it's going to do for our township, which already is just about capacity with transportation around here," Baker said.

"We are also worried about what (Rouse) plans on doing with the (older) properties. I would like some guarantees they will be preserved or rehabbed authentically," she said. Likewise, West Whiteland historical officials have taken a strong stand against the development - from a purely preservation perspective.

In East Whiteland Township, Rouse has proposed changing 261 of the 315 acres of the Church Farm School tract located there by developing 62 acres for single-family homes, 40 acres for multifamily housing, 135 acres for light- industrial or warehouse use and 24 acres for commercial use.

The Rouse firm, headed by Willard Rouse of Malvern, wants to change 946 acres of the tract's 1,100 acres in West Whiteland. Under the plan, 503 acres would be for housing with from one to 15 units an acre. The proposed changes also include a 42-acre town-center zone and 401 acres for office use and warehouse development.

"Our position is that we feel the zoning change as requested should be denied because we find no benefit at all to the historic resources if the zoning is changed," said Diane Snyder, who heads the West Whiteland Historical Commission. "The potential for a negative impact is very, very large. We don't see our properties gaining anything at all."

But Rouse officials, including project manager Greg Walters, an architect by training, see the restoration of the properties as the most exciting part of the Churchill master plan.



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"From my perspective, this is one of the fun parts of the project - to figure out uses and go into them and bring them back to life," Walters said. "We will take each one as the project progresses and incorporate them into the project."

Located mostly in West Whiteland and East Whiteland Townships, the sprawling tract also includes slivers of land in both Uwchlan and Charlestown Townships. Rouse has an agreement of sale with the Church Farm School to buy the land if the rezoning is approved. The school would retain the southeast corner of the tract, where its facilities are located.

Rouse could develop the land under its current zoning, a combination of commercial and residential areas in all townships. However, the firm is asking the townships to rezone large

portions of land to make way for the multiuse development, which it sees as a better way to use the property. In addition, it has promised to spend \$40 million on road improvements in connection with the development, more than 10-fold what it would be required to donate to the townships under the current zoning.

Rouse's idea is to integrate the land and the historic sites into a master plan. For example, one or more of the homes could become community centers for a surrounding residential area. A large home could become a restaurant, or, as in the case of the Benjamin Jacobs House, be rehabilitated for office use.

From his office on the second floor of the restored Jacobs house, which is now the Churchill headquarters, Walters can look out from a windowed alcove to the rolling green below.

It was that land that Benjamin Jacobs inherited from his father, John Jacobs, who bought the land in 1750. When he died in 1780, it was divided between his sons, John and Benjamin. Benjamin Jacobs built a large house on his property.

It had deteriorated over the years and most recently had been used as a dormitory for boys attending the Church Farm School. It had also been the victim of vandals and the weather. The third floor, which has not yet been rehabbed, is marred by graffiti and peeling paint.

The history of the properties is described in detail in a report prepared by John Milner Associates Inc., architects, archaeologists and planners with a special interest in historic buildings. The West Chester firm was hired by Rouse three years ago to research the history of the tract.

Begun in early 1987, the 99-page survey was released in July 1987. Much of it was gleaned from the work already completed by the local historical societies.

The Benjamin Jacobs House was "in danger of deterioration and was at a point if it had gone on much longer, would have been lost," said Peter Benton, who serves as Milner's project manager on the study.

Rouse, he said, "wanted to make a statement by restoring one of the buildings to show financial commitment and a physical presence."

"To us, it is significant that it is being used. This type of use is appropriate," Benton said.

Besides information about each property, the study provides maps that indicate a recommended "area of significance," or buffer zone, around the property.

The West Whiteland historical group recommended that regardless of development, the areas of historical significance outlined by Milner be preserved.

In the group's position paper, the members said, "The township's official policies and purposes with regard to historic resources are better served under the existing zoning than in the request currently before the Board of Supervisors."

Benton explained that the areas of significance were based on landscape features, and not on arbitrary measurements. For example, a property's suggested boundary line may be formed by a stream corridor, a hedgerow, a stand of trees, or other natural configurations in the landscape. "We were not responding to any development plan," Benton said. "These areas of significance are not cast in stone."

"You have to look at everything on its own merits," said Peter Richardson, associate director of Milner's architecture department. "The areas of significance change as the plan develops. We haven't honed in on any specific use for any property. At this point in time, we have to keep our options open."

"We will take these on a case-by-case basis and treat them as sensitively as possible," Walters said. "We will do what the historic commission requires in their ordinance, at the very least."

Although Milner has been hired by the developer, it views itself as being in the business of protecting historic properties.

"We have an interest in protecting historic buildings," Richardson said. "We have national recognitions." Among those are the 1989 National Preservation Honor Award of the National Trust for Historic Preservation for the restoration of Mellon Independence Center, formerly Lit Brothers in Philadelphia.

"We are dedicated to historic buildings, but we have to acknowledge that we live in a world of compromise," Richardson said.



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