

# Chabad of the Berkshires plans modern new home in Lenox

*By Clarence Fanto, Eagle correspondent*

LENOX — Chabad of the Berkshires, an orthodox synagogue based on South Street in Pittsfield, will construct a modern center in Lenox, but only after removing a historic house that some feel should be preserved.

The group won backing this week from the Lenox Zoning Board of Appeals. Several residents told the board they support the project, while others questioned the need to tear down an 1862 house — it was named Cozy Nook when built as a residence by the Tucker family — regardless of its condition.

The project would demolish the decrepit but historic property at 17 West St. in the 1-acre residential zone near downtown.

The Lenox Jewish Center plans to offer services and educational programs and will include a residence for Rabbi Levi Volovik, his wife, Sara, and their seven children.

After 90 minutes of discussion, the board voted 5-0 on Wednesday to approve a special permit approving a parking plan in front of the new center and acknowledging the religious and educational uses of the facility.

The Dover Amendment, a state law, exempts nonprofit religious and educational organizations from restrictive zoning bylaws in residential areas and bars town boards from interfering with construction plans for those uses.

There will be 23 paved parking spaces in front of the new building, with screening and shielded lighting, and 11 gravel spaces on the side as needed. No overflow parking will be allowed on West Street.

Volovik said there is no start date yet for demolition of the house and construction of the new building. Chabad purchased the home from Lenore Katherine Smith for \$685,000 in November 2016. A renovation, which had been considered, would have cost an estimated \$1.3 million.

As with all special permits, the board has 14 calendar days to file a written decision with the town clerk, and there's a 20 calendar-day appeal period after that.

During the public hearing, Chabad's attorney, Lori Robbins, cited a lengthy memorandum by Springfield attorney Maurice Callihane of Egan, Flanagan and Cohen, PC, specifying that, under state and federal law, "municipalities cannot impose dimensional requirements that are burdensome for educational or religious uses."

Robbins said Lenox has what she termed "a burdensome zoning requirement" that limits building coverage to 4 percent of a lot and requires a 200-foot setback from the street. The proposed structure covers more than 4 percent, and the setback is less than 200 feet, Robbins noted.

But zoning rules cannot be enforced because of the Dover Amendment.

Two previous lawsuits involving special permits granted for religious and educational projects in Lenox failed.

## Renovation hurdles

Robbins noted that the Chabad project was aired informally before the ZBA in March 2018, seven months after an on-site community presentation.

At that time, Chabad's plan was to renovate and add to the existing structure.

The attorney cited Chabad's lengthy consideration of a renovation project for the "big, beautiful, multi-family" West Street site, located between a Lenox Housing Authority special-needs facility and a law office, both with in-front parking.

"But they really can't renovate the building," Robbins told ZBA members. She cited mold and other factors that would make it more expensive to renovate than to take it down and build a new structure.

The proposed new building "will completely comply with the dimensional requirements for a residence in Lenox," she said.

### Article Continues After These Ads

Despite a town bylaw requiring 80 percent of the parking to be behind or at the side of the house, the property's logistics and topography make in-front parking more feasible, according to Robbins. She said abutters who responded to her outreach favored the in-front parking plan and asked for screening and low-level lighting.

Volovik said he and his wife moved to Pittsfield from Brooklyn, N.Y., in 2004 to establish a Chabad House for a small congregation in Pittsfield.

The center in Lenox would provide religious services, he said, as well as Hebrew classes, a library, a community room for worship, religious and educational meetings and lectures.

Due to an influx of second-home owners and visitors to Lenox in the summer, Chabad has been renting space at the town's Community Center for 12 years to hold traditional Sabbath services Saturdays in summer. The rabbi said that because of the orthodox restriction on driving from sundown Fridays to sunset Saturdays, congregation members often stay in nearby bed-and-breakfasts so they can walk to services, calling their presence beneficial to local inns.

Some residents walk 2 or 3 miles in each direction to attend services, Volovik said.

As a practicing rabbi for nearly 15 years, he told the board, he hopes to "provide spiritual guidance for many years to come in the community of Lenox, for Berkshire County residents, and most importantly, to be a good neighbor to all."

Questioned by ZBA member Albert Harper, the rabbi said that no weddings are anticipated for the Lenox center.

Project architect Anthony Allegrone displayed the design for the new, 12,000-square-foot, two-story, 30-foot-high building. It includes the rabbi's offices, a library, social hall with an adjacent sanctuary and three bedrooms on the first floor, with the primary living quarters on the second floor.

The exterior, designed as a traditional New England-style residential structure with a pitched roof,

is aimed at "merging this building within the existing fabric of Lenox and the surrounding area as much as possible while still satisfying the programmatic and organizational needs of the building's use," Allegrone said.

James Scalise, engineer with the SK Design Group of Pittsfield, said the parking plan calls for 23 paved spaces in front, with landscaping including 6-foot-high plantings, and 11 more spaces available on gravel, as needed, in the setback, on the side and the driveway to the garage.

"The concept is to keep this relatively residential in scale," he said, with Colonial-style, downward-focused lighting for the driveway parking area.

A letter to the ZBA from Planning Board Chairwoman Pam Kueber, representing her personal views, questioned the project's lack of a complete plan and the front-yard parking.

West Street resident and Lenox Historical Commission Chairwoman Olga Weiss, who is not an abutter, bemoaned the planned demolition of a historic structure and said that "parking in front adds insult to injury."

"I am really devastated by the decision to demolish this building," Weiss said. "If you destroy a streetscape, you are essentially taking what is our most salient and beautiful quality and destroying it."

"I, too, am in shock," said Lucy Kennedy, a Historical Commission member. "It seems to me to be moving very fast." She asked for a slow, cautious approach.

Hotel owner and Lenox resident Joseph Toole supported the plan, noting that "the vast majority of my clientele are Jewish, a vital part of the Berkshire community." He predicted that many guests would attend Chabad services.

"The value that this would bring to a community is obvious, and maybe you don't want more people coming to Lenox and your property values going up, but I think you probably do," said Dr. Jonathan Kramer, who plans to move to Lenox from Pittsfield to attend Chabad services.

Robert Fuster Sr., the ZBA chairman, indicated his support before the vote.

"I've met very few people in the Berkshires that wouldn't be pleased by something like this," he said.

*Clarence Fanto can be reached at [cfanto@yahoo.com](mailto:cfanto@yahoo.com), on Twitter @BE\_cfanto or at 413-637-2551.*

If you'd like to leave a comment (or a tip or a question) about this story with the editors, please [email us](#). We also welcome letters to the editor for publication; you can do that by [filling out our letters form](#) and submitting it to the newsroom.