

Lubavitch focuses on traditions of Judaism

By James Radebaugh
staff writer

What is Lubavitch?

One answer is that it's a Jewish organization arguing with West Bloomfield officials over zoning laws and construction plans for a campus/retrac on land Lubavitch owns in the township.

Another answer is that Lubavitch is a worldwide outreach movement that promotes Jewish education and the traditional observance of Judaism.

The name, pronounced lu-BAY-vitch, is the same as that of the small town in White Russia where the movement originated 200 years ago, according to Rabbi Yitschak Kagan, of the organization's center in Farmington Hills.

It translates as something like city of brotherly love, according to Kagan, who says the name befits the organization's mission.

"We believe everything is divine providence. Nothing happens by accident," Kagan said.

LOCAL ATTENTION from outside the Jewish community focused on Lubavitch in December when Kagan and other movement leaders from the Farmington Hills Center protested a proposed zoning change in West Bloomfield that they said would prevent them from building a rabbinical college and retreat adjacent to the Jewish Community Center on Drake Road.

Rules regarding how the 40-acre site can be developed are being reviewed by the township, and some officials have expressed opposition to the retreat, saying it doesn't fit into their plans for the community's development. Lubavitch members say they are determined to build the retreat.

Lubavitch has its roots in the modern Hasidic movement that swept

through Jewish communities in Eastern Europe more than 200 years ago. Kagan describes Rabbi Israel Baal Schem Tov, founder of the 18th-century Hasidic sect, as a populist who spread Jewish teachings to the uneducated.

Today, Lubavitchers, as they call themselves, carry on the task, teaching and encouraging traditional Judaism throughout the world. Much of what they do is conventional charitable work, such as caring for prison inmates and drug addicts, Kagan said.

LUBAVITCH RECEIVES financial support in varying amounts from 15,000-20,000 families in Michigan and has about 250,000 active adherents worldwide, according to Kagan.

The organization is based in Brooklyn, New York. Its leader is known as the Rebbe, a position that transfers loosely along family lines. The current Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Schneerson, took the position in 1950 and is described in a book published by the Lubavitchers as the "inspiration and driving force behind

the success of Lubavitch today."

Kagan's reverence for the Rabbi Schneerson was apparent as he talked about him, describing the Rebbe as the pre-eminent and most prolific Jewish scholar alive, a man who sleeps little so he can work more.

"In the Jewish world there's no one who even comes close to the Rebbe," he said.

While Lubavitchers teach a strict interpretation of the religion, they also tend to be politically conserva-

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Rabbi Yitschak Kagan

Group won't back down on plans to build school

By James Radebaugh
staff writer

The Lubavitch Foundation of Farmington Hills will not give up its fight to build a rabbinical college and retreat in West Bloomfield, a spokesman said.

Spokesman Berl Falbaum said the foundation will pursue all its options to carry its plans forward, following a Jan. 23 vote by West Bloomfield's planning commission. The commission voted to approve a change in zoning law that Lubavitch says is intended to block the development.

"We're not surprised by the vote," Falbaum said. "We're disappointed, but we're committed to this project. We're reviewing all our options, legal and otherwise."

THE ZONING ordinance amendment, if enacted by the township board, would bar college and university campuses from residential-zoned areas, where they are currently permitted with special approval, and allow them, when specially approved, in certain business and office park zones.

The amendment reduces the mini-

mum size of a site proposed for a campus from 40 acres to 20 acres and increases the required distances between buildings and property lines.

SINCE THERE are no business-zoned areas in the township large enough to accommodate a 20-acre campus, the amendment would, in effect, limit such developments to the office park districts along Haggerty Road.

Lubavitch officials contend that the amendment, which the commission approved 8-0, is meant to prevent them from eventually building on a 40-acre parcel of land near Maple and Drake that is currently zoned for residential development.

Lubavitch owns the property but has not yet presented the township with any formal building plans.

"We do believe they've targeted the project . . . as to motivation, we don't speculate on that," Falbaum said.

Township officials say the proposed change is not directed specifically at Lubavitch.

THE TOWNSHIP board will vote

on enacting the change sometime in February, according to trustee Gordon Allardice, the board's representative on the planning commission.

Even if the change is approved, Lubavitch could request that its property be rezoned for business development and then seek special approval to build the campus.

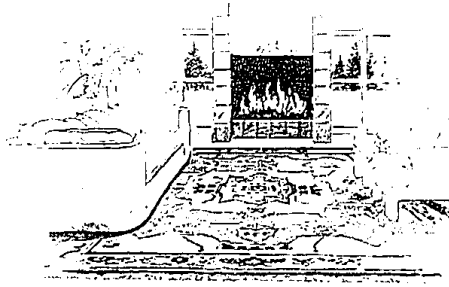
While such a move would depend on the cooperation of the town board, which would have to approve both the zoning change and the special use, Lubavitch would still need special approval from the board to build a campus under current law.

THE PLANNING commission, in the same motion that approved the proposed amendment, directed a subcommittee to study ways to establish a special zone that would accommodate college campuses.

"We do believe they've targeted the project . . . as to motivation, we don't speculate on that," Falbaum said.

Officials fear that if the campus weren't built, an unwanted business could locate on the property.

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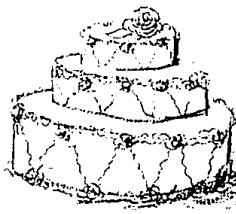
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