

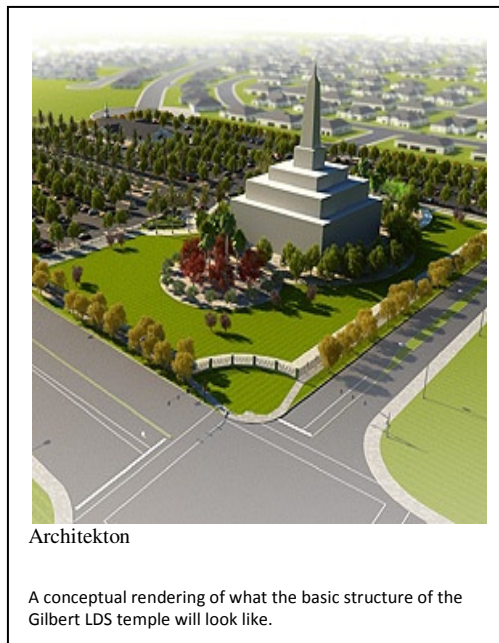
Panel paves way for new Mormon temple in Gilbert

by Katherine Greene - Sept. 3, 2009 07:29 AM
The Arizona Republic

The Gilbert Planning Commission got its first look Wednesday at a temple that the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints plans for the southeast corner of Pecos and Greenfield roads as it approved a series of zoning changes to pave the way for its construction.

Paul Gilbert, an attorney representing the church as it goes through the town approval process for the temple, unveiled artistic renderings of the building to show why he is requesting several exceptions to Gilbert codes.

The building will be square and tiered, according to the rendering, with a tall, thick steeple resembling the Washington Monument. Flanking the temple on either side will be two round heavily landscaped areas, similar to the LDS temple in Mesa.



The design is so unique that the approval process by the church took longer than normal, Gilbert had said earlier.

"In 9½ years (on the commission), this is probably the most or close to the most enhancements on a property that I've ever encountered," said Commissioner Michael Monroe. "To have a sacred place as part of our community is exceptional."

The church was seeking multiple exemptions from town codes related to the temple's height, right-of-way, and exterior walls.

But Gilbert stressed that the church isn't asking for the exemption to make it easier to develop. Rather, he said the changes were needed to make the site more aesthetically pleasing.

"This church does not skimp on temple sites," he said. "We don't spare in any way coming up with a building of utmost quality."

Temples are the most sacred places in the LDS faith - it's where weddings and other special events are held, and not everyone is allowed inside.

"This will be a signature and key location in Gilbert," said Chairman Anthony Bianchi. "It's more likely to spur more and quality development in the area," he said.

The commission approved the church's request through separate motions on a general plan amendment, a zoning change and a use permit.

Commissioners Bridgette Peterson and Karl Kohlhoff weren't present.

At a study session for the project last month, Kohlhoff expressed concern over control of the sidewalks around the temple - if they're under church control but open to the public, the town may be liable for accidents that happen there, he said.

The sole dissenting vote was cast by Jennifer Sarkissian, who voted against the zoning change because she disagreed with the exception that allows the church to nearly double the normally permissible height.

"It's right next to a residential development," Sarkissian said. "You're going to be able to see it from everywhere."

That neighborhood hasn't yet been built, but the land is owned by the LeSueur family, which also owns the temple plot.

The temple itself will sit closest to the corner, behind a low wall that will separate the sacred grounds from the rest of the property. The church also plans to build a meeting house and a maintenance building on the site.

This year, three of the town's first overnight-stay hotels opened their doors in Gilbert. Two of those hotels are within a mile of the temple site, and another is planned. Those developers say being near the temple influenced their decision to build here.

The temples attract thousands of visitors a year, Gilbert has said. He also has said the church hopes to complete construction in three years.

<http://www.azcentral.com/community/gilbert/articles/2009/09/03/20090903gr-temple0904.html>