

Sports center zoning hearing continued to March

By Lea Kahn
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Spruce Street Partners LLC, which wants to develop an indoor sports center on the site of the former Coleman Suzuki car dealership at 1060 Spruce St., will have to wait until March to learn whether the township Zoning Board of Adjustment will approve its application.

The zoning board began its public hearing on the application last week, but ran out of time to complete it.

The board took a few minutes to take care of some reorganization matters, including the swearing in of Charles Lavine for a four-year term as a regular member, and the election of Peter Kremer as chairman and Sam Pangaldi as vice chairman.

Although an indoor sports center is a permitted use in the Highway Commercial zone, a height variance is needed. The maximum permitted height is 35 feet, but Spruce Street Partners LLC has proposed the indoor sports center to be located inside an inflatable dome that will be 76 feet tall.

The dome will contain nearly 97,000 square feet. The entrance would be through a 6,550-square-foot single-story building at the rear of the site.

Attorney Gary Forshner, who represents Spruce Street Partners LLC, said his client's proposed indoor recreation center would be an "excellent use in a section of town that is in need of redevelopment." The Coleman Suzuki property has been vacant for about 15 years, he said.

The 11.7-acre Coleman Suzuki property is located on a portion of land that was approved for a Wal-Mart store several years ago. The controversial application, which included 1060 Spruce St. and 1100 Spruce St., gained Planning Board approval in 2007. But Wal-Mart pulled the plug on the project a few months later, citing a shift in the company's growth strategy.

The Coleman Suzuki property was sold in June 2013 to an unidentified buyer for \$550,000, following an unsuccessful attempt to sell it at a real estate auction. There

were no bidders for the property at the real estate auction. The sale was negotiated after the auction.

Kevin Costello, the director of Centercourt Athletic Clubs (the parent company of the would-be developer), said the company owns several indoor sports centers. They are split between tennis clubs and indoor athletic centers. Youth programs constitute the largest chunk of its business, he said.

"We would like to get into this town," Mr. Costello told the zoning board.

The indoor recreation center would focus on youth programs, he said. There might be some in-house sports leagues and maybe some rentals to outside groups. His company would conduct sports clinics. The facility might include a soccer field and maybe two or three basketball courts, but it is based

on the community's needs, he said.

The facility would be open from 8 a.m. to midnight, Mr. Costello said. The peak hours would be 4 p.m. to 8 p.m., for after-school programs. There would not be much activity from 8 p.m. to midnight, except for the adult sports leagues. On occasion, a portion of the athletic fields would be rented to a group for training purposes.

Turning to the dome, Mr. Costello explained that it takes nearly five hours to inflate the dome, which he compared to "a giant balloon." It would take about eight or nine

hours for it to fully deflate if there were a rip or a tear. The dome is not supported by any structural members. Fresh air is pumped into the dome, and there is a back-up emergency generator.

Mr. Costello assured the zoning board that the dome is "a lot tougher than you think." It would take a lot of effort to damage the dome. It's not as simple as sticking a pin in it or slashing it, and watching it deflate, he said.

There is a 25,000-square-foot building on the property that Spruce Street Partners LLC would like to convert into small-scale retail or office uses, Mr.

Costello said. Although tenants have not been signed up, he said they would likely be shops, such as lacrosse or soccer stores.

"The towns we are in, we are good neighbors," he said, adding that "it's not just all sports, all the time. It's a center for the community. It will be a real improvement."

The next public hearing on the application is set for the Zoning Board of Adjustment's March 18 meeting. The meeting starts at 7 p.m. and will be held in the lower level conference room at the Municipal Building.