

church fights for site

Nearby residents fear clogged traffic

By ERIC STRIGUS
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Michele Battle remembers the days when a church was welcome in any neighborhood.

Not anymore, she says.

Battle is an attorney representing the Covington Highway Church of God, whose application to build a new sanctuary in southeast DeKalb County is opposed by some people in the surrounding neighborhood.

Residents fear the church will bring more traffic to a rapidly growing area often clogged with vehicles on two-lane arteries.

DeKalb County commissioners are expected to vote on the proposal today.

Church leaders at first said they would withdraw their proposal, but then decided they would not go away so quietly. They say they will attend today's commission meeting and expect parishioners from more than a dozen area churches to join them in what they consider a battle for the rights of churches.

"The church is not a hazard to a community," said the Rev. Stanford Johnson, pastor of the 60-member church. "The church is uplifting to the community, and I do not see why a church should not be welcomed in the community."

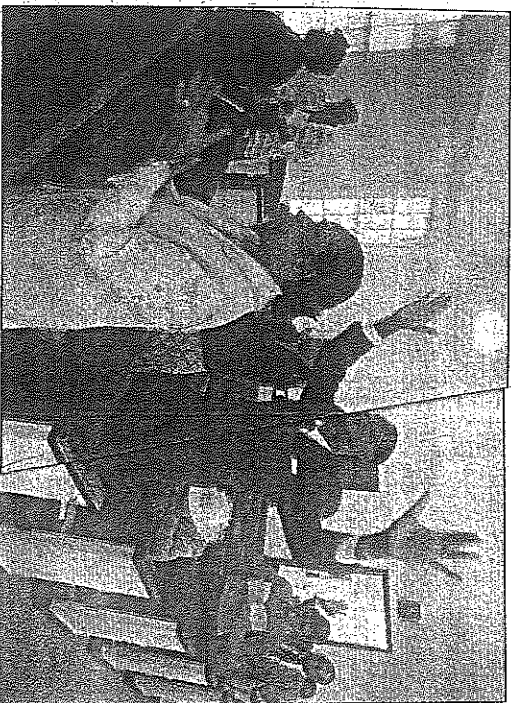
But Miaia O'Neil, who lives near the proposed site, said the new sanctuary would bring more traffic to a neighborhood that, she said, has already experienced a sharp increase in traffic accidents. She noted there are seven houses of worship in a one-mile radius of the proposed site.

"A church only helps exacerbate the existing problem," said O'Neil, president of the Deshon-Rockbridge Coalition, a group that represents about 25 subdivisions in the area.

"This county needs to look at what is enough in the way of churches in residential communities."

It's a conflict that has played out in DeKalb and other metro Atlanta areas.

Many modern churches are multifunctional facilities that provide a range of services such as schools, day care and job training. Those expanded options often generate daylong noise and traffic, annoying



MEMBERS OF THE COVINGTON HIGHWAY CHURCH OF GOD JOIN IN A HYMN SUNDAY IN THEIR CURRENT SANCTUARY IN THONIA.

Dekalb church fights for site

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some homeowners.

Such fears prompted the Atlanta City Council to reject a proposal from Ben Hill United Methodist Church to build a 3,000-seat sanctuary last February.

Dekalb recently enacted restrictions limiting the services, such as transitional housing and homeless shelters, that churches can open in residential areas.

In Dekalb, the number of properties belonging to religious institutions has mushroomed, increasing from 887 to 1,025 in the last 10 years, according to county officials.

Churches have had to compromise. To address residents' concerns about its plans for a new 25,000-square-foot sanctuary and a 10,000-square-foot preschool, Our Lady of the Assumption Church in Brookhaven signed an agreement that set guidelines on how many students could attend the school, how it would manage parking overflow and other issues.

Any discussion of church growth in Dekalb inevitably leads to New Birth Missionary Baptist Church, the largest church in metro Atlanta. Between 1987 and 1999, the church's membership grew in biblical proportions, from 3,000 to 23,000.

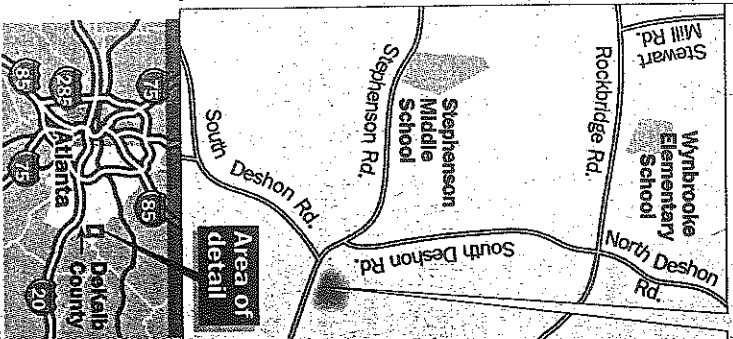
In 2000, New Birth moved to 250 acres of undeveloped land near Lithonia to build a 10,000-seat sanctuary, a private school, family life center and several ball fields. Even at

its current location, traffic logjams on days the church holds services are common.

"The assumption is all churches will be a megachurch and that is not true," said Battle, who insists Covington Highway Church of God has no plans for megagrowth.

The proposed location for the church is near the intersection of Stephenson and South Deshon roads. A once undeveloped area, it now has several upper-crust subdivisions, a middle school and a large tract of land that is being carved to build another subdivision.

PROPOSED SITE
The Covington Highway Church of God wants to build its new sanctuary near the intersection of Stephenson and South Deshon roads. Dekalb commissioners are expected to vote on the proposal today.



DALE E. DODSON / Staff

The church was attracted to the area because the five-acre tract it wants is much larger than its current location.

But both major roads near the planned church are one-lane in each direction.

County planning officials have recommended that commissioners approve the new sanctuary.

Win or lose, O'Neil hopes his debate inspires Dekalb to find a system that would promote better planning of churches in residential areas.