...still waiting...

On Monday night, Pottstown Council issued a Certificate of Appropriateness for roof repairs to the historic Wainman house at 61 N. Franklin Street owned by the Pottstown Cluster of Religious Communities.

The mansion is located in a neighborhood where “client-based social service providers” are specifically excluded by zoning. In 2010, when the Cluster bought the American Legion building next door, it sought and received a waiver for its operation from the Pottstown Zoning Hearing Board.

The $481,000 building is exempt from all real estate taxes.

Outright purchase

Last July, however, the Cluster purchased the Wainman house outright for $105,000 without first seeking a waiver from the zoning hearing board. Pottstown’s zoning officer, Maria Bleile, has repeatedly asked the Cluster how it intends to use the property. As of last Monday — nearly six months after the Cluster bought the building — she has yet to receive a written response.

But shortly after the Cluster bought the building, Frank Cebular, president of the non-profit, published a letter in The Mercury stating the building “will be refurbished to provide administrative offices, classroom space for the Bridges out of Poverty and the UP3 programs, office space for the Housing Resource Center program, meeting space for the board and other staff and community meetings needed for Cluster programs.” That would likely require a zoning variance.

Tax exemption

Meanwhile, the Cluster obtained an exemption for the building from all real estate taxes from the county Board of Assessment Appeals because it is a charity.

Assessments down

As of Jan. 1, Pottstown’s tax base is at its lowest point since the county last reassessed in 1998. School taxes have skyrocketed as the number of economically disadvantaged children has tripled in recent decades.

Follow the rules

The Cluster’s work is admirable, but not when it attracts more poor families to Pottstown than borough taxpayers can support.

And the Cluster needs to follow the rules like any other property owner.

Commentary by Tom Hylton

The Wainman house at 61 N. Franklin Street was purchased by the Pottstown Cluster of Religious Communities nearly six months ago. It has yet to apply for a zoning variance to use the building, but it did apply for — and receive—a tax exemption.