

Historic Tacoma church might be razed for mixed-use housing development, pastor says
BY BECCA MOST MARCH 22, 2024 5:30 AM

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MASON DEVELOPMENT PROJECT For more than 125 years, Mason United Methodist Church has served a prominent role in North Tacoma's Proctor neighborhood. Now, facing an economic shortfall coupled with a dwindling and aging congregation, its pastor has ambitious plans to raze the building and construct a mixed-use housing and community center in its place.

A block away from the vibrant Proctor shopping corridor at 2710 N. Madison St., a once-busy church is slowly dying, with the average congregant's age being 80, the Rev. Susan Boegli told The News Tribune this week.

The church expects to run out of money in about six years, Boegli said. Rather than sell the 1.74-acre site to a market-rate housing developer, Boegli said she wants to build a new space there that embodies her faith's mission of social justice and addresses community needs like housing and child care.

Although the final design is subject to change and dependent on funding, the plan is to raze the 1959 building and develop between 100-150 apartments of mixed-income housing, with an emphasis on affordability. Indoor and outdoor community spaces, a labyrinth, a food bank, office space and a place for multi-faith spiritual and meditative practices also are being considered, as is an affordable child-care center, an arts venue and retail space, Boegli said. The parsonage in the back would remain, and the stained-glass windows in the chapel would be incorporated into the new space, she said.

Proposals for an affordable housing developer are due April 12. Once a developer is chosen, the church would hire a professional to develop a fundraising campaign, Boegli said. After several years of fundraising, Boegli said, she expects the shovels would go into the ground and the rebuild would begin.

The Mason Development Project is expected to cost \$85 million, according to Boegli. The bulk of funding would come from tax credits, grants, philanthropy and fundraising efforts, she said. Local businesses, government agencies and nonprofits might lease the space in the future, which would reduce the overall cost, Boegli said. Anyone interested in getting involved with the project or fundraising efforts can contact Boegli directly, she said.

Although the plan is still in the pre-development phase, it has garnered support and interest from Metro Parks and the City of Tacoma.

Support for the project is front and center of Proctor's Neighborhood Plan, which explicitly calls for more affordable housing, child-care centers, community gathering space and green space, Stephen Antupit told The News Tribune Tuesday. Antupit works for the city to support the visioning and implementation of long-range neighborhood planning.

"All those things fit together really nicely. It's kind of an aligning of the stars with the church location ... We'll see what happens as they get further into understanding what's feasible to do with the property," Antupit said. "I think one of the most exciting things about this project is that it's in a location that hasn't had the opportunity to support lower income workforce housing."

The North End needs more housing that's affordable for the people who work in that neighborhood, said Michael Mirra, who served as executive director of the Tacoma Housing Authority for 17 years and is a member of the Mason Development Project Steering Committee.

Making those investments would strengthen the economic and racial diversity of the area, he said. There are not too many parcels of about 1.75 acres in size in the North End that are available for such purposes, Mirra added.

'DO OR DIE'

Founded in 1898, Mason Church has been facing challenges with a dwindling and aging congregation for years, Boegli said. About 45 people attend worship on Sundays, but at one time that number exceeded 200, Boegli said.

"The truth be told, the model of the church that exists right now ... is obsolete," Boegli said. "Myself, you know, I didn't come into this Christianity thing until my 30's. I've got one foot in the secular world and one foot in the sacred world, and it's clear as day to me that this model is gone. That's why churches are dying because this model does not speak to people at all."

There are plans to create a non-denominational spiritual center in the new building, which Boegli emphasized would be kept a safe space for meditation and multi-faith worship.

Mason Church is not the only church in the region or nation facing declining membership, and many other churches are likely going to be watching this development project with interest, said Hunter George, who is a former member of Mason Church, member of the Mason Development Project steering committee and works as the policy and government relations officer at Metro Parks.

George credits a lot of that interest to Boegli.

"She's the right person in the right place at the right time. And she's just learning as fast as she can. Her job is to be a pastor, not a housing developer. And so she's just jumping in with

both feet, and she's meeting anyone and everyone," George said Tuesday. "I've gotten three emails from her today about various meetings. She's just trying to soak it all up and learn as much as she can so that she guides the project to the best possible outcome."

Boegli said she gave a sermon in January 2023 titled, "Do or die," in which she told her congregation that they had to take bold action to survive. The choice to raze Mason Church has not been an easy one for members, some of whom have worshiped at the church for almost 70 years.

"The needs of the 21st century are not the needs of 125 years ago. How could they be?" said Pat Roundy, a long-time church member and co-chair of the Mason Development Project.

"If we're going to die, we've got nothing to lose, so let's go bold," Boegli added. "This is our legacy. If we don't do something like this, we will have no legacy."

For 72-year-old Gaye Windsor, who was born and raised in Northwest Tacoma and attended Mason Church her entire life, the change has been hard. Although she's come around to supporting the project and serves on its steering committee, Windsor said the concept is still hard for many long-time members to grasp.

Windsor's parents were members of the church when she was born, "so I've been part of this church my entire life," she said. As a young girl, Windsor said, she remembers the church full of people and life.

"I want to hold onto it because it's like my family," she said. "The music, the organ, the ambiance of the windows in there, the smell of it, the auditory part of it. When I sit down in the pew I feel my blood pressure go down. This familiarity, this thing that I love to be at peace in — and that's not going to be there anymore."

Windsor said when the reality of the situation hits her, "it can be very devastating, and I've cried my tears."

Letting go and grieving the history of the church has been the hardest part, she said. It's especially hard for older members of the church to accept the reality when they don't envision themselves as part of the church's future yet, Windsor said.

"It's been good for me to be a part of this [steering] group, because I don't know how I could have handled it without," Windsor said. "[I'm] feeling good about stepping into the future with this vision, which is a grand vision. It could be life-changing for a lot of people that need it, and in so doing for ourselves as well."

Until then, Windsor still sits in the same pews her parents sat in for decades. “I’m not going to say that I’m completely over it,” she said. “Every Sunday I go to church and I go, ‘I’m going to miss you.’”