

Stanley Congregational Church offers to donate its building to Chatham Borough

- By GARRY HERZOG Managing Editor
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CHATHAM– Stanley Congregational Church will hold its final service Sunday, Jan. 12, and vacate the building at 94 Fairmount Ave. after a “de-sanctification.”

The question before the Borough Council is whether to accept the congregation’s offer to donate one of Chatham’s most iconic landmarks to the municipality, along with \$350,000 for its maintenance and potential renovation.

That question will be taken up at a special meeting of the Borough

Council scheduled for 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 19, when a resolution will be considered to permit Borough Attorney James Lott to negotiate the terms of the proposed donation.

At the council’s meeting Monday, Dec. 9, Mayor Bruce Harris disclosed that borough representatives had been in talks with the church’s trustees to discuss the building’s donation “since the spring. The congregation is dwindling,” Harris noted.

Councilwoman Victoria Fife, who represented the municipality along with Councilwoman Carolyn Dempsey, Councilman Robert Weber and Director of Community Services Janice Piccolo, explained borough officials did not consider it their place to publicize the talks in advance of a decision by the congregation’s trustees.

Fife outlined the evolution of the talks held since April for “the potential generous donation of Stanley Congregational Church to the Borough of Chatham.” Nearly four years ago, she observed, the church sold off two-thirds of its one-acre property on the corner of Orchard Road, where a nursery school had been located, for the development of two houses as the congregation dwindled to about 70 members.

In April, Fife said, the church approached the Borough Council to determine interest in a donation of its 1903 sanctuary building and offices. “It’s quite spacious on the inside,” she remarked.

Fife said the borough was given access to the property for inspections “ongoing throughout the summer” of the roof, heating, parking and an environmental study. The studies were funded by the church “but the borough selected the inspectors,” Fife noted.

At the same time, Fife said, church trustees had “many questions and requests” of their own concerning a donation, and she, Dempsey, Weber and Piccolo “all were consulted. We were able to define what we could do.”

Fife said Stanley’s offer came with \$350,000 in cash assets to the borough “for use of operation and maintenance of the building.” She reported the church’s underground oil storage tank “did not pass inspection” and “Stanley will take responsibility” to remove it. Ultimately, Fife said, the borough’s representatives concluded the answer to the church’s offer ought to be: Yes.

‘Serve The Community’

Councilwoman Dempsey observed, “Stanley has a history of serving the community.” Boy Scout Troop 28, Boy Scouts of America Troop 280 and Venture Crew 28 meet there three nights a week. The church also hosts two Alcoholics Anonymous groups, music classes and other activities.

“Our hope is the facility continues to serve the community,” Dempsey said. “We definitely want to hear from residents” about its potential uses, some of which could raise revenue, she added, including fees for special events.

“Office space could be rented,” Dempsey noted. “They have a commercial kitchen. It could offer an excellent meeting space for public groups. The sanctuary would be great for concert series. A teen center could be a possibility. We could consult with the Senior Center and the library for programs.”

Space in the building would be set aside to honor the church’s founder, George Shepard Page, she advised.

Councilwoman Jocelyn Mathiasen said the borough would conduct “significant outreach to the community to get ideas,” and eventually create “an advisory committee to sort through” those ideas.

Mathiasen remarked, “It really is an extraordinary building. It is a large building. It’s an asset and we want it to continue.”

As for any costs that could arise exceeding the church’s \$350,000 donation, Mayor Harris said the potential for a grant from the Morris County Historical Preservation Fund was a possibility — especially since Chatham Borough has never applied for one before.

“We do not know how we can spare it,” Harris said of the 1903 stone landmark. “You don’t know what would happen to it” in terms of development, the mayor pointed out.

Dempsey observed, “There’s room to build parking.” Harris responded, “But it would be limited. We figure we can get some spaces.”

Mathiasen picked up on the mayor’s warning of potential development. “It could be torn down and houses would go in there,” she said. “We want to retain it so the borough can have control. It is a community asset. But we don’t want to create parking issues. We’re aware it’s a single-family neighborhood.”

Harris said another scenario was: “And you could have another congregation move in, and we would not have any control over that.”

With the meeting opened for public comment, Stanley Church trustee Monty Montague informed the council, “The oil tank has been removed and replaced.”

Parking Concerns

Raymond Rusak of Hillside Avenue, a member of the Stanley congregation, told the council the church’s “Memory Garden” is “where you want to put parking.” It is also the burial site of the cremated remains of congregation members, he advised.

Mayor Harris assured Rusak, “The leadership of Stanley is committed they will relocate that. That’s one of the conditions. That’s an issue on which the church is committed.”

Councilman Thaddeus Kobylarz, who will become mayor in January reinforced that point: “That is a condition of acquiring the property.”

Oliver Street resident Edward Fitzpatrick raised another issue: The proposed parking site is adjacent to his home, he said.

“We have a lot of concerns,” Fitzpatrick said. “It would destroy the property of my house. We will lawyer up,” he said. “We live there. We want assurances nothing can go on after 10 p.m. No way can we accept the parking.”

But Councilwoman Fife said the parking site of perhaps 14 spaces would border Fairmount Avenue, not Oliver Street.

John Kaiser of Oliver Street told the council, “There should be a special group concerning the neighborhood. It’s the neighborhood that will bear the impact” of “how intense it’s going to be used,” Kaiser said, calling for “special representation of the most immediate neighbors.”

Mayor Harris replied, “Those are good points. It’s going to take a lot of planning.” Harris assured Kaiser the Dec. 19 meeting would see a resolution to authorize negotiations “before we would accept it.”

Councilman Kobylarz also told Kaiser, “You would have a permanent role.”

A positive note was struck by Rozella Clyde of Carmine Street: “I think it’s wonderful Stanley thought of donating this to the borough,” she said. “Chatham needs public space. It could be an arts center. All the parking doesn’t have to be there. This is a space that has been used for social functions for many years.

“We are talking community events,” Clyde said. “There are other parking lots. We need a teen center. Teen centers don’t go on until midnight.”

She concluded, “It’s a wonderful gift to Chatham Borough.”

Phil Kron of Riveredge Drive echoed that sentiment: “I applaud the council with preserving a historic building.”

But Andrea Skarra of Orchard Road told the council, “I’m concerned about the parking plan,” saying she didn’t want to see “pavement all around a historic building.”

Mayor Harris replied, "I agree with you. It will be public space, not commercial space."

'Get It And Save It'

Fran Drew of Inwood Road was unequivocal in her advice to the council: "Get it and save it.

"This is a special historic site," Drew said. "There is plenty of grant money out there for historic sites."

But Michael Dean of North Passaic Avenue noted "we haven't had a public hearing" on an acquisition and asked, "What is the projected cost of bringing the building up to standards?"

Mayor Harris answered, "It depends on how we use the building," adding, "This is not going to happen this year. Our attorney will be authorized to negotiate."

Janice Perrone of Fairmount Avenue told the council, "I do think it's better for the neighborhood if the borough controls it."

Ken Chmura agreed.

"The acceptance of a historic building is a great idea," Chmura said. "They're going all too fast."