

Congregation looks into selling historic Woodfords parish house

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By Michael Kelley

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A Woodfords Congregational Church task force has made a preliminary recommendation to sell the parish house to Community Housing of Maine for senior housing. *Michael Kelley / The Forecaster*

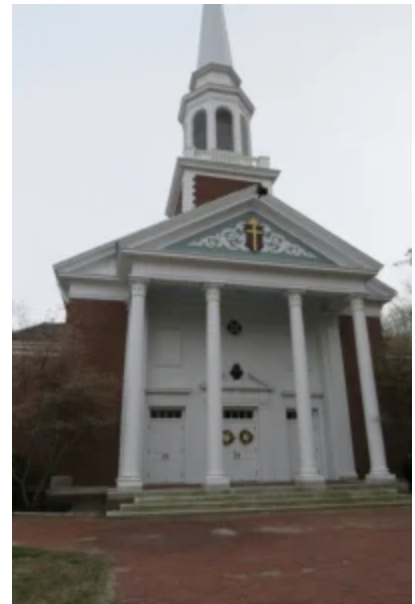
A decade ago, a vote by the congregation of Woodfords Congregational Church to sell the church's historic parish house ended in a deadlocked tie. Members of a church task force are hoping for a change of heart as they again look into selling the building, which has become too expensive for the church to maintain.

A church task force, which formed in 2019, has recommended that the nearly 100-year-old, three-story parish house be sold to Community Housing of Maine, which would convert the space and a new addition in the back into 40 residences for low-income seniors.

"This is a time of new opportunity for Woodfords," the Rev. Alyssa Lodewick said prior to an April 18 presentation about the committee's proposal.

The question, she said, is how best the congregation can use the space to "answer God's ever present call to minister not only our faith community, but the wider world."

Task force member Amy Johnson told The Forecaster last year that it has becoming increasingly difficult for the 350-member congregation to maintain the 44,000 square feet of space it owns at 202 Woodford St.



An arrangement under consideration would allow the church to retain the sanctuary and other key spaces for worship. *Michael Kelley / The Forecaster*

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The committee looked at several options, ranging from selling the building and leasing space back, selling it and moving, selling just the parish house, finding a nonprofit to move in and take over day-to-day operations of the building, or simply doing nothing.

In the end, the group unanimously recommended selling the parish house. Under the proposal, the congregation would retain ownership of the sanctuary, built in the mid-1950s, as well the chapel and memorial garden. It would also have access to common spaces in the parish house, including Memorial Hall and the kitchen, parlor and lounge.

Those logistics, Johnson said, still have to be worked out.

The arrangement, the group notes, would generate revenue to be used to “upgrade and modernize our spaces while cutting operation and maintenance costs for long-term sustainability.”

The \$200,000 annual building and maintenance costs represent more than a third of the operating budget and task force member John England said there is another \$300,000 in short-term maintenance costs needed. Necessary work includes repairs to the foundation

and the front steps to the sanctuary, security and parking improvements, fixing a leaky roof and updating technology to better livestream services and events.

The church hired Criterium Engineering of Freeport to assess their buildings' needs.

“(They) told us our church facility was in relatively good condition, but with a building as large as ours is and is getting older, putting off any maintenance improvements could have a dramatic financial impact,” England said.

Tom Hennessey, another task force member, said “now is really the time to consider and embrace the change that will ensure the vitality of our church.”

The congregation will meet June 13 to decide whether to enter into further negotiations with Community Housing of Maine, Johnson said, and a final decision on whether to sell the building is expected later this year.

“CHOM is very humbled and thrilled to be under consideration as a partner of the Woodfords congregation,” said Brian Kilgallen, CHOM’s director of development. “We believe our missions align and both organizations want to promote good within the community. CHOM’s role would be to preserve this multipurpose iconic landmark while creating some much needed affordable housing for seniors.”

This is not the first time CHOM has looked to purchase the building. In 2011, Avesta Housing and CHOM expressed interest in using the space for housing, and the Portland School District was interested in using some of the space for the West School, a program for children with behavioral and emotional disorders.

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Instead, the congregation decided to begin renting space in the building to other nonprofits to bring in revenue. More than 20 such groups use space on the property, including A Company of Girls, Maine Council of Churches, Portland Conservatory of Music, Project Feed, Stages Youth Theater and Wayside Community Meals.

Task force member Amy Segal said church offices and space for these groups would have to be relocated if the building is sold.

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