

THE NORTHWEST CURRENT

Historic board rejects Third Church project

■ **Development:** Height at issue in long-running case

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The Third Church of Christ, Scientist, along with developers who want to replace its Brutalist sanctuary with a large office building downtown, suffered a big setback last week.

The Historic Preservation Review Board rejected plans for a nine-story building with space for a new church, leaving the prominent site at 900 16th St. in legal and design-review limbo.

David Stern of ICG Properties, the development firm that partnered

with the church in its long battle to raze the blocky concrete sanctuary, said Tuesday that the church and ICG are now pondering their options. They could go back to the review board with a revised design, or appeal directly to the Mayor's Agent for Historic Preservation.

Or the church could go back to federal court to reopen what has been a lengthy legal battle over whether the board's actions violate its religious rights.

"We went in with what we thought was the minimum [size] for viability," Stern said. "We had worked with [the Historic Preservation Office], already reduced the height, increased the setbacks. We thought we were at a turning point."

Stern said his firm and the church hope to decide in the next 30 days which option to pursue. "The church is in dire straits," he said.

The battle over the church building began about 20 years after it opened in 1971. Members have been unhappy with the modernist concrete structure, which they say is too hard to heat, light and maintain — and completely unwelcoming to new members. But the building was landmarked, and the preservation board opposed a raze permit in 2008.

Since then the struggle has played out before the Mayor's Agent for Historic Preservation, and then in federal court, leading to a settlement that allows the church to be razed — but only after a design and permits for a new structure are approved.

The effort fizzled again last Thursday, when ICG presented plans for a roughly 108-foot-tall office building, topped by a mechanical penthouse, with ground-floor retail space at the corner and a dou-

ble-height church and reading room, marked by crystalline glass fins, with entrances at midblock.

The plan also assumes demolition of the former Christian Science Monitor building on the same site, a move not yet approved by city authorities. ICG is hoping to persuade the Mayor's Agent to grant that approval to make way for what the developer calls a building of "exemplary architecture."

The project will also require approval from the D.C. Zoning Commission, since the overall plan exceeds both the height and density limits for its zone. Though downsized from previous proposals, the reductions were not enough to win over either the preservation board or its staff at the D.C. Historic Preservation Office.

In a 16-page report, state preservation officer David Maloney argued the need for maintaining a consistent height in the historic 16th Street corridor, especially so near the White House. He asked the board to limit the building to the 90 feet allowed by current zoning. "This is not about shrinking a building, but the applicant's request to expand — by 17 feet."

Maloney said he feared setting a precedent, noting his office has already been approached by other nearby building owners eager to add more floors.

Some witnesses supported that view. Charles Robertson, an architect and member of the Committee of 100 on the Federal City, said ICG is proposing an unusually tall building for economic reasons, creating "a private terrace with commanding views of Lafayette Park ... that will bring commanding rents."

Roger Lewis, a professor of architecture, said he supports "selectively lifting height limits" in some parts of the city to increase tax revenues and provide more housing. But lower 16th Street is "not one of those places," Lewis said. He asked the board to "judge the value of preserving vistas" in the city's core.

ICG, church leaders and their supporters disagreed. Stern, for example, noted the same board had approved a rooftop addition to the Hay-Adams Hotel down the street.

Architect Graham Wyatt offered

a series of slides showing a shrinking building, as the design team shed two top floors and added setbacks at the behest of the preservation office. Although a mechanical penthouse, well set back, will top out at 123 feet, Wyatt said, "What's important in all of this is what's seen from the street."

Asked why ICG needs a ninth floor, Wyatt said the developers made a "significant sacrifice of floor area ... to give the church full space."

Church leader Darrow Kirkpatrick referred to the ongoing legal fight over whether restrictions on demolition of a sanctuary infringe on the congregation's First Amendment rights. "We have a strong desire to eliminate what has been a burden on religious exercise," he told the board. "The new design is light, transparent, with nothing hidden — a representation of our faith." Lawsuits and appeals have cost the small congregation \$315,000 so far, he said.

Mike Silverstein, a Dupont Circle advisory neighborhood commissioner, put it more bluntly. "For 21 years, Third Church has had to undergo this bizarre form of waterboarding when it even considered demolition of the property it owns, the property that is bankrupting it," he said. "The only way out is for them to partner with a developer. And to deny it could put us all back to square one."

Then it was the board's turn. Two members said they weren't concerned about the proposed height, but others said they couldn't approve an unusually tall top story.

"I don't hear a compelling reason why a building should go above 90 feet on this very special street," said member Graham Davidson.

The board's motion, which asked ICG to "work to comply with the 90-foot height level the law requires," was adopted 5-2.