



The First African Baptist Church faces challenging future

A South of South worship site's pastor wants to sell and a developer's ready to build town houses.

By Bill Chenevert

Posted Aug. 27, 2015 | Comments: 2 |  Add Comment

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The historic church at 16th and Christian may be sold, razed and turned into town houses if Rev. Terrance Griffith can strike a deal.

Photo by Tina Garceau

The First African Baptist Church, 1608 Christian St., is in trouble. The nearly 110-year-old church, founded by freed African-Americans in what is now considered Chinatown even before the congregation moved to Graduate Hospital, is suffering from some structural deficiencies and the pastor is ready to sell the property to developer Gary Jonas for more than \$3 million.

Local preservationists are rushing to make sure that the building be at least considered for historic protection. A minority of congregants is fighting the pastor's ability to sell the parcel. And just like the Royal Theater, 1542 South St., another vestige of South Philly's rich black history, the church stands as a symbol of rapid neighborhood changes that often reflect a new, whiter population influx. A site where Booker T. Washington once spoke could soon be million-dollar town homes.

"We're very aware of the structural challenges facing the First African Baptist Church, and we're monitoring the situation – there's not much involvement for us this point," Lauren Vidas, South of South Neighborhood Association (SOSNA) chair, said. "We think they're an important part of the neighborhood, and we'd like to see the church stay, but we understand the financial challenges facing the institution."

Vidas shared a story about a neighbor who tripped and broke an ankle walking on the Montrose Street side of the church. The City's Licenses and Inspection (L&I) was called and, days later, a fence was up on the South 16th Street side protecting the sidewalk and pedestrians from potentially dangerous structural disrepair.

"There was an L&I hearing last week and the ultimate outcome of that is there will be a full engineering assessment to really determine how fragile the building is," Patrick Grossi, director of advocacy for the

Preservation Alliance of Greater Philadelphia, said. “The most compromised section of the building is along 16th Street, which is currently fenced and part of the wall is physically bowing out. That wall needs to be addressed,” but Grossi says it’s not as dire as an eager-to-sell pastor and congregants claim.

Grossi says his organization “identifies properties that are at-risk, and in an ideal universe we are proactively doing that. Given the nature of the real estate market in Philadelphia right now, we are often responding to a very rapid pace of development, particularly one where just about anything is up for grabs right now.”

He says the church is the oldest independent black church in the state and in the city.

L&I’s chief of staff, Beth Grossman, deferred comment due to current litigation, and said “The City is represented in the equity court case by Joanna Klein, deputy city solicitor.” She also provided a definition for what L&I considers imminently dangerous structural elements: “Those which are in such a state of damage, deterioration or removal that collapse is expected at any time.” This doesn’t appear to be the building’s current designation, more that it’s unsafe with elements that “are badly damaged, deteriorated or missing, with additional structural deterioration expected unless remedial action is taken. The conditions do not indicate that collapse is imminent.”

Some reports have boiled the property’s conflicting interests as a fight between L&I and the Philadelphia Historical Commission while Rev. Terrence Griffith waits to turn a profit and relocate his parishioners’ worship to West Philly. The over 1,000-capacity church typically sees Sundays 1/10th full.

PHC’s executive director, Jon Farnham, set the record straight.

“The system is designed such that the two agencies will not be in conflict. The department’s goal is to ensure safety. The Commission’s goal is to protect historic resources. In almost all cases, both goals can be accomplished simultaneously. In those very rare cases when a historic or potentially historic building poses an imminent threat to public safety that can only be abated through demolition, the commission steps aside and allows for the demolition. Public safety is prioritized over preservation.”

Farnham also says that achieving historic status for a building does not require the proprietor to get it up to code immediately or that it even continue to be a church.

“Designation does not result in an automatic requirement to rehabilitate or restore,” he said. Furthermore, “it cannot require that a church continue to be a church. Churches can be challenging to preserve and adaptively reuse. The Historical Commission understands such challenges and works with owners of former houses of worship to find creative ways to reuse them while retaining their character-defining historic features.”

Sharif Street, an attorney who represents Griffith and the church’s sale, says the congregation can’t shoulder the responsibilities of restoration.

“The cost associated with repairing the building is exorbitant, well beyond the capacity of the church’s membership. The church has already invested \$1 million in stabilizing repairs,” he noted. “Because of the location of the building, it has a lot of value on the open market, and the church is confident that if you set aside whatever historical considerations there are, the property could be sold for a considerable amount of money, which would allow the church to buy another building.”

There have been accusations that Griffith is set to benefit from the sale big-time.

“I believe that to be untrue,” his lawyer said to that and stances that the congregants opposed to the sale are being bullied and ostracized. At multiple church meetings, “over 90 percent of the congregants have voted to move forward with the sale and the relocation of the church,” Street said, adding “those people have gone outside church procedures – I don’t begrudge them.”

Rachel Hildebrandt, from Partners for Sacred Places, has been watching the church inch towards a sale with apprehension.

“Because the property is located in a neighborhood that is seeing a great deal of development, adaptive reuse is a viable option if the congregation would consider selling to a preservation-sensitive buyer,” she said. “The problem is, it’s more profitable to sell to a developer who will demolish versus to one who will preserve.”

One such instance of just that is Alon Barzilay’s Sanctuary Lofts at 2321-27 Fitzwater St. What began in 1889 as the Saint Anthony of Padua Catholic Parish is now 38 units, some of which have stained-glass windows.

“When it comes to churches, those are special buildings – they play an important part in the community. I wish they could create a Booker T. Washington museum, but the neighborhood didn’t wish that to happen,” Barzilay said of the FAB Church, and sees some optimism in gentrification, which is entirely market-driven. “My take on gentrification is that neighborhoods gentrify independent of particular projects. It does not happen overnight – it’s a process that takes decades.”

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