

Boston Globe October 7, 2020

Grace Church in Newton seeks preservation funds to restore bell tower

By Shaun Robinson Boston University journalist, Updated October 7, 2020, 2 hours ago



Grace Episcopal Church in Newton Corner. SHAUN ROBINSON

Grace Episcopal Church in Newton is seeking nearly \$1.5 million in community preservation grants to repair and restore its 19th-century bell tower, a landmark advocates say is at risk of collapsing and likely will need to be torn down without the city's financial support.

[The church's proposal](#) went before the Newton Community Preservation Committee Sept. 15, and city officials now are considering whether the tower

— as private property of a religious organization — provides enough tangible public benefits to receive aid through the Community Preservation Act.

The Massachusetts state measure, in place in more than 170 communities, allows cities and towns to levy a surcharge of up to 3 percent to support historic preservation efforts, along with o

In Newton, community preservation grants are raised through a [1 percent surcharge on property taxes](#). The city adopted this funding model in 2001 under the state's Community Preservation Act.

Advocates said the tower at Grace Church not only poses a safety risk but also is important to locals for its visual appeal and the sound of its bells. The church hosts many events for public groups, they said, and [was cited](#) in the surrounding area's nomination to the National Register of Historic Places.

“This is really a historic preservation project,” said Leah Gasset, a member of the church's governing board, in an interview. “Like other historic preservation projects, it has the benefit of maintaining that landmark in the community, and the neighborhood, as a major defining feature.”

Grace Church borders the eastern edge of Farlow Park at the intersection of Eldredge and Church streets in Newton Corner. The church was founded in 1855 and moved to its current site in 1873, according to its [website](#), making it the first stone church in the city.

The church's nearly 110-foot bell tower has what could be considered “a design flaw,” said Scott Aquilina, manager of the restoration project, at the hearing Sept. 15. The base of the spire above the bell loft is particularly weak, he said, which has caused cracks to form in the masonry.

“We need to stabilize the tower in the next 12 months,” Aquilina said, adding there is a risk that pieces of the tower could fall or that the entire structure could collapse.

To repair the tower, he said, the church would first install steel reinforcements at the spire's base to address the most immediate structural concerns. Then, a second phase of work would focus on restoring the stonework that covers the tower both inside and out.

The project is estimated to cost about \$2.9 million, according to the church's proposal. City preservation grants would cover half the cost, advocates said,

and to make up the rest, the church could launch a fundraising campaign and apply for other grants from the National Fund for Sacred Places and Massachusetts Historical Commission.

“Grace really does not have the resources to preserve the tower without public support,” Gasset said. Without the city’s funding, she added, “we will have to look at alternatives to address what is a current public safety issue, and likely that would include removal of the tower.”

The question of whether or not religious organizations should receive community preservation grants reached the state’s Supreme Judicial Court in 2018, which [ruled](#) that churches cannot be totally barred from receiving these funds under the [anti-aid amendment](#) to the Massachusetts constitution.

Taxpayer money cannot, however, be used for projects that support a church’s core religious activities, the court decided. For instance, the court [said](#) if a church in Acton used grant money to renovate the stained glass windows in its worship space, it could infringe on the “liberty of conscience” of taxpayers “who do not subscribe to the church’s beliefs.”

Ryan McManus, an attorney advising Grace Church, said in an interview there are differences between the case in Acton and how Grace hopes to use public funds in Newton. No worship services take place in the tower, he said, and it does not bear any religious imagery.

Newton has [never given](#) preservation funding to a religious organization, McManus said, though many cities and towns have statewide. At least [six projects](#) involving churches were approved for preservation grants in Boston last year, including the restoration of [one’s deteriorating tower](#).

“We view it as a great opportunity,” McManus said. “This is a particularly pressing need. It’s a well-known church. And I think in a lot of ways, as far as a church funding project goes, it’s one where it’s much easier to divide the public benefits from any aid the church might be getting.”

The Newton Community Preservation Committee is slated to further discuss Grace Church’s proposal at its next meeting, which is scheduled for Tuesday, Oct. 13, at 7 p.m.