

Congregation stays in any sale of site

Deal to hold condition that services continue

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The historic Third Avenue United Church is hitting the market.

The church's congregation will meet next week to approve a plan to sell the 99-year-old downtown building with the hope someone will buy and renovate it as a 1,000-seat concert hall or arts centre.

Under any deal, the 120-person congregation will continue to hold services and the historic collegiate gothic structure will not be torn down, said Peter Barnacle, chair of the church board's building committee, which drafted the conditions in a request for proposals.

"The idea is the building will be sold, but preserved for use by the congregation for an indefinite time," Barnacle said.

"Our hope is that a new owner would be able to maintain the building in a manner in which we're having more and more difficulty doing."

There will be a number of conditions that any group buying the building must meet, Barnacle said. For instance, the Saskatoon Children's Choir, a longtime tenant, should be able to continue to use the space. The next iteration of the building must also be consistent with the church's values, he said.

"We're not looking for it to be turned into a strip club," Barnacle said.

At least two groups have expressed an interest in bidding, both of which are targeting a concert hall or arts centre concept, Barnacle said. The building has phenomenal acoustics, seats 1,000 people and has a history of hosting symphony performances and concerts, including the legendary Duke Ellington Orchestra.

One potential bidder has approached the church congregation directly, while the other is working with Mark Turner, a local pianist and arts promoter who this year started the non-profit Third Avenue Centre to put on concerts and community events in the space to help the church.



CREDIT: Greg Pender, The StarPhoenix
Mark Turner, artistic director of Third Avenue Centre, stands in front of Third Avenue United Church on Friday. Turner's non-profit group is hopeful the building will be developed for use as a concert hall or arts venue.

Turner has rallied support for his concert hall concept plan, including keen interest from the University of Saskatchewan, which is exploring a joint venture to rent space for concerts, wind orchestra performances, lecture series and drama productions. Discussions are at the early stages, but the university is looking to expand its reach in the downtown, said Colin Tennent, associate vicepresident of facilities management at the University of Saskatchewan.

"It just opens up limitless combinations and possibilities," Tennent said. "The Third Avenue facility is incredibly appropriate for many acoustic properties that are difficult to find elsewhere. The size (1,000 seats) meets the sweet spot that is missing across the city right now. It's a stunning building."

Turner's concept involves building a large concert stage, renovating the basement and expanding washroom facilities, which are lacking when 1,000-plus people are jammed into the building.

"What I really hope is that this building will become an incubator for music and culture," Turner said. "I think that because the congregation can no longer afford to run it themselves, this is the perfect solution. It's a Saskatoon solution."

Stantec Consulting has donated a three-dimensional computer model of the church so it can be viewed by bidders from out of town. The model enables potential buyers to mock up any renovations.

Barnacle said a low bid price hasn't been determined yet for the building. There are few comparable properties and the non-negotiable conditions of the deal somewhat limit the value.

A United Church property assessor from Toronto is coming in to estimate the building's value with a sale price worked out during negotiations. The last date for bids is Sept. 4.

The Third Avenue United issue reflects a wider problem for churches in Canada: Dwindling congregations in large, deteriorating heritage buildings. They have been having difficulty keeping up with the costs of operating and maintaining the 12,000-square-foot building. Efforts to maintain and pay for the physical building take away from the church's core mission, Barnacle said.

"It's not just the financial resources, it's the resources of people," he said. "The church has to bear in mind that our role is one of mission and ministry whether we're operating out of a barn or an impressive building. Our efforts to be able to rebuild our congregation and reach out to the community - that all takes a lot of energy. If, at the same time we're struggling to maintain our physical infrastructure, it seemed to us that we had to make a choice. We could (scrape by) or we turn over the building to a good owner that will operate the building in a manner that allows us to stay and is consistent with our values."

There are a number of other examples of historic downtown churches being converted. In Ottawa, the 117-year-old St. Brigid's Catholic Church was purchased for \$450,000 in 2007 after the Archdiocese of Ottawa closed the church. It was converted into an arts centre.

It is difficult for many to see a church go up for sale, but the goal is to enhance the building, Barnacle said.

"This building is not going to be lost to the community," he said. "It will be preserved as a public building and it will be essentially an artstyle cultural centre that contains a church as opposed to a church that contains a cultural centre."

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