

Building Our Future: Beyond Ourselves

by Walt Rothwell and the Building Our Future: Beyond Ourselves Team

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Which Path Should Our Church Take to Build Our Future? Your Building Our Future/Beyond Ourselves Team (BOF/BO)

Over the past four years our congregation has undertaken an active visioning process to identify the best path forward to grow the congregation while honoring our UU principles. The Board has determined that a congregational vote will be held in January to choose if our church should “stay” on the current property or “go” to another location to meet the needs of our growing family. This is only the first decision for the congregation to make, but a highly significant one.

This journey for us has included deep conversations about our past, present, and future. We have engaged national denominational advisors and local experts in real estate, building/property design, and construction. Our team has traveled in-person to visit four UU churches in the region to understand their spaces, experiences, and lessons learned. In recent months we have offered many activities and resources to share expert opinions, address questions, and engage with each other to reflect on the upcoming decision. The BOF/BO team has listened intently to members and advisors, and we have each deeply reflected with our minister upon the best path for our church ahead.

We keep in mind the 166-year history of our congregation in Rochester. The 54 years we have called the current church building our home is the longest period that we have been rooted in one place. We had three earlier churches on two different properties before this church was built in 1967. While our current members strongly identify with this home, we do not believe that nostalgia should obscure our vision. Principle seven, respect for the interdependent web of all existence, calls us to sit gently on the land and honor our surroundings and community.

The team has recently submitted our collective recommendations to the Board:

The Building Our Future/Beyond Ourselves team:

1. Believes that “living our faith” guides our actions as First Unitarian Universalist Church;
2. Concludes that the mission of the church can be fulfilled only by an extensive remodel or by building new on site or by going to a new site;
3. Concludes that of the comparative options, building on a new site would be far more affordable and be the most fiscally responsible option;
4. Concludes that the “go” option is good stewardship and does not shift the burden of making important decisions about building issues to future First UU generations;
5. Concludes that the “go” option best assures the flourishing of Unitarian Universalism in south east Minnesota;
6. Supports exploring further the “go” option, which may include building new on a different site or moving to a suitable existing building;
7. Supports the “go” option in the upcoming congregational vote;
8. Recommends that the Board of Directors also goes on record as supporting the “go” option in the upcoming congregational vote.

In this article the BOF/BO team briefly outlines key insights and conclusions that lead us to this unanimous recommendation.

“Stay” on the property in a renovated building

It would be possible to expand the current building to reach the capacity we are targeting. It would require a larger footprint of the building in all possible directions, which would compromise the green space available to us on this property. An expansion would be complex but might possibly be staged in such a way that we could “get by” with on-site services during the construction process. However, the end result would be less earth-friendly than a new building, and we could encounter objections from neighbors regarding the larger structure. It is also possible that abatement issues (e.g., asbestos, oils, hydraulic fluids, chemicals, electrical components) may require special disposal that would increase the current projected costs.

Parking expansion is a major problem with the limited space available. A parking structure on the property could (alone) cost \$4 million and would degrade the “curb appeal” for all who come, live in the neighborhood, or pass by. Many of our members rightly question if future transportation options may allow for fewer parking spaces, but (for now) there are city requirements and limited alternatives.

A remodel and expansion of the current site would be the “last best” building improvement and could not serve the goals of the congregation beyond 20-30 years, probably fewer. It would be the most expensive option for us to pursue based on current estimates. Our team concludes that this choice would just “kick the can down the road” and leave our future generations yet again with similar complex choices. Our church has been in three prior buildings in the past 150 years, so we are confident the congregation of today can move forward with better choices.

“Stay” on the property, demolish the church, and build a new structure

A new building could be designed for this property. It would most likely remain in position at the top of the hill, and with efficient design the new building footprint may not consume more space. The goal of additional green space and parking could require retaining walls along the hillside and pose increased challenges with runoff. No drawings of a new building or property changes have been considered at this point, but all possible options would be examined if the congregation votes to “stay.”

The parking challenges remain a major obstacle with this approach, as stated above. Designing a parking area underneath the new building is cost-prohibitive according to the expert advice we have received. It is unlikely that a new building on the current property could be configured for expansion, so future options for a growing congregation would remain troublesome.

“Go” to another location

A decisive “go” vote would lead to exploration of many options. There might be an existing church or other building to consider adapting to our future needs. It is more likely that we can achieve our vision by starting anew on an undeveloped plot of land. Our team continues a detailed review of vacant land available on the market now, pending, sold, and off-market. This listing is posted on the Building Our Future page on the website and is being updated regularly in consultation with our realtor.

The potential gift property is only one option for new land to build upon. The gift has not been accepted by the congregation at this time, and there are requirements from the donor(s) for the gift to proceed further, including a successful capital campaign. This site option would be explored, compared with other choices, and then be subject to a vote of the congregation. The donors have offered to make an in-kind donation (\$300-400,000) towards a different property if chosen: “A new church should be built on the best available property, wherever that may be. If a better property is available, we are committed to providing similar level of financial support.” Staying on the current property would eliminate this generous offer.

Designing and building on an undeveloped lot is the most flexible choice in terms of building and green space design and least expensive in terms of construction costs. Sale of the current church (estimated market value of \$3.5-\$4.1 million) would provide income to offset these costs. The possibilities for optimized accessibility, green space, preferred parking solutions, earth-friendly design, and even staged future expansion would serve our upcoming church members especially well. It would also permit the careful planning for a new memorial garden and the sacred transition of the current garden to a new location in a single effort.

Financial and fundraising issues

Some church members are anxious about our capacity to raise the funds necessary in a capital campaign, the state of the economy, or the demographics of our members. These are reasonable concerns voiced by experienced members. However, careful review has been underway, and the forthcoming financial feasibility study will provide our best opportunity to set reasonable goals for the chosen path forward. The “go” option provides us with the least expensive course, adaptable to affordable increments, with costs offset by the sale of the current church and the potential for a land-related gift.

The BOF/BO team unanimously concludes that the best course for our church is a vote to “go” in January, followed by an investigation of all related choices for future voting. This is the most financially responsible option, the most adaptable to the outcome of our feasibility study and capital campaign, and the most in line with our values and mission.

The BOF/BO team has submitted this recommendation to the Board for their consideration, and they have had a limited time to discuss it. We anticipate the following events will proceed before the congregation votes:

- **Friday, January 6** - A special e-news will be broadcast with the BOF/BO Building Recommendation (resolution & Grace Notes article), an invitation to January 11 forum, and the announcement of a special Board meeting.
- **Wednesday, January 11** – A final evening forum will be held to prepare for the vote. The BOF/BO team will discuss their recommendation and address all questions regarding the January vote.
- **Thursday, January 12** – A special Board meeting will be held to determine the Board's response to the BOF/BO team recommendation. The outcome will be announced to the congregation.
- **Sunday, January 15** – Board action will be announced at Sunday Services and via special e-news, reminding all of the approved voting process and timeline.
- **Wednesday, January 18** – Board will host a Fireside Chat for final questions and conversation.
- **Sunday, January 22** - The congregational vote begins at 8 am, with church leadership available that morning to address any questions regarding the issues and process.
- **Sunday, January 29** - The vote will close at 3 pm and the outcome will be announced later the same day via e-news.