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West-Park Presbyterian Church Announces \$30M Social Justice Fund, Pending Landmark Sale Decision

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The Presbytery of New York City announced on Thursday the creation of a new endowment — the West Park Presbyterian Church Social Justice Fund — which it says would significantly expand its ability to support underserved communities across the five boroughs. But the initiative hinges on a decision that’s been one of the Upper West Side’s most **divisive preservation battles** in recent memory.

According to the Presbytery, proceeds from the potential sale of the 135-year-old church at 165 West 86th Street, on the corner of Amsterdam Avenue, could generate between \$25 and \$30 million for the new fund. Those funds would, in turn, be used to increase the Presbytery’s annual social-service funding by 350%, supporting programs for food assistance, housing, education, immigrant services, and health access across New York City.

The sale, however, cannot move forward without the New York City Landmarks Preservation Commission’s (LPC) approval of a hardship application the church submitted on September 12. The congregation argues that the Romanesque Revival building has deteriorated beyond repair after decades of weather damage and minimal maintenance, with parts of its sandstone façade posing safety risks to pedestrians. The

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sidewalk shed that has encased the building for nearly 25 years has become a physical reminder of the church's prolonged disrepair — and a symbol of the community divide over what should happen next.

If the LPC grants approval, developer Alchemy Properties would purchase the site and **replace the landmarked structure** with a new mixed-use building that includes retail, housing, and a 10,000-square-foot modern worship and community space for the congregation. The church says the new facility would allow it to expand its social services and continue supporting arts programming on the Upper West Side. Construction, the Presbytery notes, would take a little more than two years.

The proposal marks the latest chapter in a years-long clash between preservationists, local leaders, and the dwindling West Park congregation. In recent years, the Center at West Park, an arts organization that operated from within the church until a few months ago, became the public face of opposition to demolition, backed by elected officials and **celebrities including Mark Ruffalo** and Matt Dillon. The group argued that the church could be restored and remain a community arts hub; the congregation countered that the necessary repairs were financially impossible for its small membership to sustain.

Earlier this year, the Center officially relocated its programming to St. Paul & St. Andrew, a few blocks away, but continues to advocate for saving the original structure. Preservationists have maintained that approving the hardship would set a troubling precedent for other landmarked buildings in need of costly restoration.

The Landmarks Preservation Commission has not yet set a date for a public hearing or vote on the hardship application (though Community Board 7's Preservation Committee will meet tonight, October 9, to discuss the matter – learn more **here**). If the application is denied, the sale and the proposed fund would not move forward as described. If it is approved, the church would use part of the proceeds to settle debts and re-establish its financial stability, while transferring the remainder to the Presbytery to endow the new Social Justice Fund.

The fund, the Presbytery says, would provide as much as \$900,000 annually in grants to its member congregations for programs addressing food insecurity, housing instability, education, health, and other social needs — as well as limited support for the preservation of other historic Presbyterian properties across the city.

For now, the West Park Presbyterian Church stands in a kind of limbo: a landmarked building with uncertain structural integrity, a congregation seeking reinvention, and a neighborhood still wrestling with whether saving the past should outweigh plans to invest in the city's future.

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