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Latest effort to knock down landmark church

By: James Barron
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West Park Presbyterian Church on West 86th Street and Amsterdam Avenue.

Credit...

Jeenah Moon for The New York Times

The church on the Upper West Side that wants to demolish its 140-year-old building in a real estate deal has a plan for the \$34 million it hopes to end up with.

The church, West Park Presbyterian, plans to set up a “social justice fund” with \$25 million to \$30 million. Interest from the fund, about \$900,000 a year, would be distributed as grants to other Presbyterian churches in New York that provide services like soup kitchens and nutritional programs, housing assistance for immigrants and before- and after-school programs.

The rest of the money, possibly as much as \$4 million, would go toward paying down West Park’s debts and rebuilding its congregation. The church would have space in the new apartment building on the site, at Amsterdam Avenue and West 86th Street.

The deal depends on persuading the city to lift the church’s landmark designation. The church took the first step in the process to do that last month when it filed a hardship application with the city’s Landmarks Preservation Commission, claiming, as it has for

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the last several years, that it cannot afford to keep up the building.

The second step will take place this evening, when the Preservation Committee of Community Board 7 holds a hearing on the application. The committee will hear from elected officials, along with Landmark West!, a local preservation group that says approving the hardship application could set a dangerous precedent for dwindling congregations in historic churches.

There will also be a presentation from the Center at West-Park, the arts group that had been a tenant in the building and sees as part of its mission preventing the demolition of the church. The church evicted the center during the summer after the center lost a legal challenge involving its lease. The center moved to another church a couple of blocks down West 86th Street.

The West Park building has been surrounded by a sidewalk shed for years, and the church says that its tiny congregation cannot afford the structural repairs that are needed.

"I think there's no hardship," said Gale Brewer, the City Council member who represents the neighborhood, who said she goes into the West Park building regularly. "It's not falling down. I haven't been hit by a brick."

The church and the arts center are at odds about how much repair work is necessary and how much money the center has on hand. "Of course the church appreciates the artistic value and wishes them well," a spokeswoman for the church said. "But their lease expired at a crumbling church, and the church could no longer afford to subsidize their operation."

Debby Hirshman, the executive director of the center, said that it had offered to pay substantially more rent and to carry out renovations to the roof, the gutters and the facade that would have cleared the way for a sidewalk shed around the church to be removed — an offer the church did not take up.

Roger Leaf, the chairman of the West Park Administrative Commission, a church panel set up to sell the building, said last month that if the city did not remove the building's landmark designation, the church would still move to sell the building. But he said that selling a landmark building "certainly won't be anything approaching the proceeds the church will get" if the building can be demolished.

The preservation committee has scheduled another session for Oct. 29 and will forward a resolution on the hardship application to the full community board, which in turn will send a recommendation to the landmarks commission, which has the final say.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2025/10/09/nyregion/grand-central-dear-new-york.html>