

Background to Shelter Project located in First United Methodist Church Building off Pearl Street

- For many years, FUMC has been dipping into its endowment to keep afloat. While it has seen an increase in membership in recent years, cut costs, instituted long term cost savings, it needs to obtain a tenant to use part of its building and pay rent in order to remain in the building. The ServiceNet lease of the education wing provides this needed cash infusion for a sustainable future.
- Over the past five years, FUMC has looked into commercial uses of its building, up-scale residential uses, and others. It was told that its best and most likely use in the current climate would be as a warehouse.
- FUMC approached ServiceNet Inc which has run Barton's Crossing shelter since 2012 about relocating the shelter to the FUMC building several years ago. ServiceNet has been looking for a replacement to the aging and derelict building on upper North Street since it took over here 8 years ago. They have checked out countless locations, which were either too expensive to renovate, required too much rent or were too far away from existing human services for its clients. The FUMC site meets all the requirements for ServiceNet.
- The pricetag for conversion of the education wing at FUMC is quite low due to the existing design, layout, construction materials, and the fact that handicap access amenities are already in place. A fire sprinkler system must be installed and some limited refurbishment of floors, doorways and bathrooms is required.
- Last fall, the Commonwealth Supplemental Budget was approved including an earmark of \$200,000 for this project. With the help of Berkshire Housing's foundation, this has enabled ServiceNet to complete the removal of obsolete elements from the space, prep for new amenities, purchase of plumbing fixtures, alterations of the elevator, and contract for the sprinkler system. Permits for the demolition and sprinkler work have been granted.
- In the meantime, the City has committed \$100,000 to the project which will allow for completion, although ServiceNet will need a bit more funding it plans to obtain from the Commonwealth.
- Last fall (2019), Downtown Pittsfield was informed of these plans and the intention to have the shelter functional by late fall 2020. A meeting was held with the Executive Director in February 2020 updating her on the progress of the project and willingness to talk with DPI members. Nothing came from DPI until a week or so before the hearing before the Development Review Board in July 2020.
- Use of the education wing of FUMC as a residential facility is permitted under current zoning. Approval was necessary to assure that the design met all appropriate building and life safety standards, which DRB staff confirm. A variance is necessary for no parking. Since there are few clients of the shelter who have vehicles and ServiceNet plans to purchase parking rights from the City in local lots, the variance would normally be granted.

- Finally, the DRB has to determine that the shelter is not a burden on the Cultural overlay district. It is this which DPI challenges.
- DPI alleges that there are a lot of problems with poor people around the North Street area, including people hanging around, defecating in public, panhandling, harassing passers-by, sleeping in doorways and the like. Such behavior does occur.
- However, the DPI cannot connect this with the location of the shelter, because: a) many of the people doing these things actually live in the area and not homeless; b) the persons living with untreated mental illness and/or addictions who are engaged in this behavior are not residents of the shelter, because they refuse to follow shelter rules of conduct, which include medical compliance, addiction recovery work, and behavioral standards; and c) many poor people gather in the downtown during the daytime, often sitting in the library and bus terminal, because there is no day program for them. These include persons living with developmental disabilities, lonely persons, those with mental health or addiction issues, as well as the homeless. They are here already and locating the shelter on Pearl Street will not add to the numbers or frequency of such persons being in the downtown.

Letters to the Pittsfield Development Review Board may be sent to:

City of Pittsfield
Development Review Board
Department of Community Development
City Hall
70 Allen Street
Pittsfield MA 01201

OR email: choss@cityofpittsfield.org

Members of the DRB, whom you may contact are:

Chair: Sheila Irvin, Elizabeth Herland, Matthew Herzberg, Floriana Fitzgerald, Cynthia Brown, Paul Sandala, Gary LeVante.