

St Andrew's Episcopal Church: Jr. Warden Annual Report

19 November 2023

Let me begin by saying that it continues to be a privilege to serve as the Junior Warden of this parish. In my two years, we have made some general improvements and are developing some exciting plans for our property. But, more than that, I am continually impressed by the volunteers who gladly give of their time and resources to help maintain the integrity and beauty of our space. While there are many people who have contributed significantly, I do want to specifically thank our Parish Administrator, Dylan Thomas. Without his ability to navigate with our vendors, be available to guide them while on site, and his strong communication skills, we could not have been able to do the work that we have to date.

Because the Newell House property is one of the biggest areas of focus, I will delay discussing that until the end of my report. I do want to highlight a few things prior to getting to the Newell House.

Lighting

As we sit in this sanctuary, some of you are sitting in the back pews reading this report. The reason you are able to read normally is because we upgraded our lighting and dimmer system for the sanctuary earlier this year. We contracted with a firm out of Milwaukee to get the new bulbs and dimmer system. One of the advantages we found working with them is that we did not need to replace the core of the lamps, but just add new LED bulbs. We had a hearty group of volunteers who helped to replace the bulbs, which we did over the course of two days. Based on the expected life of LED bulbs, we don't anticipate that we will need to replace any bulbs for 10-20 years. And, with the new dimmer system, we have much more flexibility with how we can light the space for worship, special services, and other occasions.

We are working with Mainstage to clean up some intermittent flickering we have seen. They do have a technical solution that they are willing to install for us which, when they did the first of two installs, greatly reduced the flickering effect.

Heating

Ideally in any year, you hope that all you need to invest in is routine maintenance and upkeep of facilities and equipment. However, some system may need extra repair because we are at the end of the life of a part, or because it devolves in some way. In years past, this happened with the elevator and condenser in the unit in the conference room. This year, we had a couple of more unexpected and reasonably costly repairs related to heating. We have had to replace actuators and, more recently, the two radiators in the chancel on either side of the organ. Even with these unplanned for expenses, we are doing well against our budgeted numbers.

Overall maintenance

Through weekend work days, our volunteers have been able to take care of a number of smaller but important improvements to our property: fixing the lighting problem in the kitchen and the hallway behind it, aiding in weeding some of our gardens, and cleaning up the Newell House. We are looking forward to doing some touch-up painting yet this year inside the church proper and doing some weather sealing on some of our doors.

Newell House

I would like to spend the majority of my report on the Newell House, in part because this is where a lot of time and energy have been spent this year. Specifically, I would like to review how we got to our current place in discussing the property, and talk, then, about our move-forward plan.

Back in 2022, we assembled a committee to review the current state of the Newell House, its uses, and potential improvements to the property. Because of the age of the building and how it was being utilized by a couple of groups at that point, we wanted to ensure we had a good long-term plan for the house. The outcome of that committee was a report that was presented to the Vestry in February of this year and shared with the parish at our spring meeting. I would like to highlight a couple of current state findings:

A. There is very limited use of the space. Besides the AA group that was using it weekly (we have since moved them into the church building itself because of the condition of the front steps), the Boy Scout group used it infrequently and we did have a group from West High School who used it for a small period of time, but had stopped using it by the beginning of this year.

B. In looking at the condition of the building, the committee noted two areas of major concern from a safety standpoint: the back porch and the retaining wall (we had removed the playground equipment in 2022 because of the safety concerns with that structure). Other parts of the house were not considered to be an immediate safety concern, although it was clear that we would need to consider upgrading parts of the house if we were going to have additional programming in that space.

In that backdrop, the committee collected some high-level cost estimates to help inform how we should use the building as part of our mission and ministry to the community and the investment we would need to make. In short, to fix the immediate safety concerns would cost over \$50,000. That is also the estimate we received for tearing down the house, if it was deemed that was the appropriate choice. Also, if we determined we wanted to upgrade a room or area of the house, we would be responsible for bringing that area and access paths to that area up to code. The minimum cost, for example, of the kitchen would be \$15K, assuming that we would not need to replace the existing power lines.

After that committee completed its work, the Vestry asked for a new committee to solicit and collect feedback from the parish about the building, the parcel of land, and the future. I am appreciative not only of those who helped to gather the information, but from the many people who provided their opinions and shared their hopes for that space. During our question and answer, I will be happy to elaborate further about the conversations we had with many parishioners, but we did not hear unanimity in perceptions of what we should do. Nevertheless, we do believe that a couple of key themes emerged that were summarized in our report to the Vestry:

1. Given where we are in attendance, growth, and programming, and how the Newell house may not be serving those needs, we should consider clearing the property.
2. The property itself is important to our church and, as such, we need to re-envision how it should meet our current mission and goals as a parish.

I acknowledge that not everyone agrees with these two statements. For example, a few people indicated that we may want to fix up the property and use it for lower income housing. This option was discussed with the Vestry but ultimately we don't believe we have the resources to bring the entire house up to code and then, on top of that, become landlords, whether managing the property through volunteers or outsourcing to a management company. As a result, we took that option off the table.

Since that time, the Vestry has charged a new committee to answer two fundamental questions:

- a. Are we able to clear the property and, if so, what is the estimated cost?
- b. If we are able to clear the property, how could we make the best use of it to meet our mission?

This new committee has begun its work in earnest, meeting roughly biweekly with key tasks being accomplished between the meetings.

There are a number of components of this work. There is the identification and RFP process from firms for clearing the property. In conjunction with that, we believe there are a number of elements (fixtures, woodwork, etc.) of the current house that a restoration company would be interested in purchasing and removing. We are looking at having such firms make bids on stripping out valuable components before removing the house. Also, we have been actively getting rid of old and unusable stuff we have accumulated over the years, the remaining items will need to be stored in our church and so we are looking at reorganizing our space here to potentially move those items.

The removal of the house, while perhaps the most involved, is just part of the larger picture. We also believe it is equally important that we have a clear vision for what we want to do with the parcel of land. During our communication sessions over the summer, we heard a variety of thoughts of what we could do with the space: gardens, gathering, and accessibility, to name a couple. We will work with the parish to flesh out these options and flush out others so that we can provide recommendations to the vestry for how to move forward.

All of this work represents what we can do as a parish. But a critical component that needs to be addressed is getting approval and alignment with key entities that have a vested interest in the future of this space: the city of Madison, the Diocese, and the neighborhood. We recognize that, given the historical designation of the neighborhood and the house, there may be resistance from the city, so we need to make sure we do have support and approval if we move forward with a plan to clear the property. If we don't, we will need to make sure we are ready to implement a backup plan to address the fundamental safety concerns. And all options need to consider our financial position.

In summary, we believe that there is a strong alignment in removing the house from the property and repurposing it for our mission and our immediate future. Now is the hard work of determining how we can accomplish this. We are approaching this work with care and ensuring that we continue to engage all appropriate parties, most of all the parish. It is our commitment to ensure that you are aware of our progress and are integral parts of defining the vision of that space.

