



THE RUBRIC

STORIES OF MINISTRY

SAINT MARK'S EPISCOPAL CATHEDRAL, SEATTLE, WA

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by Emily Meeks

ACROSS the country, churches are reimagining their greatest financial assets—property—as tangible spaces and places of mission and ministry. Saint Mark's has been doing this for years, serving as a resource for the Diocese of Olympia and more than 100 community non-profits that use the Cathedral campus for meetings, fundraisers, concerts, celebrations, and commencement programs. Many people see Saint Mark's Cathedral as their “commons”—a gathering place for all in times of crisis, sorrow, and celebration.

One year ago, the Vestry of Saint Mark's formed a committee to explore a new opportunity of place—affordable housing on campus, specifically on the St. Nicholas site.¹

“Prayerfully we are asking,” said Senior Warden Scott Hulet, “What is the highest and best missional use of this valuable resource? What are unmet needs before us that could be met by how this property is used? How can we contribute to human thriving and honor God's Kingdom vision by its use?”

The burden of renting or buying an affordable home in Seattle continues to become increasingly unrealistic in Seattle. In the Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue area, four in ten residents pay more than 30 percent of their income and one in five pay more than half on housing.² Affording a

median two-bedroom house in Seattle (\$609,950) requires an income of \$170,171 but the minimum wage in Seattle is \$18.69 per hour.³ Rising housing costs are one of the driving reasons for one in three residents who are considering moving away from Seattle.⁴ These statistics give only a glimpse at the implications and contributing factors that arise when housing is unstable or becomes out of reach.

Several factors make the timing now ideal to explore affordable housing, including a new City of Seattle ordinance that allows zoning modifications for property owned or controlled by religious organizations,⁵ and the reality of managing increasing financial costs for operating the St. Nicholas building.

“The Vestry takes seriously its responsibility and commitment to be good stewards of the St. Nicholas building and its parcel of land,” said Hulet. “This is evidenced not only in how it currently is being utilized and maintained but also in recognizing that the age and condition of the building requires careful discernment regarding its viability for future use in its current form.”

The Affordable Housing Committee, co-chaired by John Hoerster and Emily Meeks, is carefully assessing mission alignment, viability, and feasibility across a spectrum of affordable housing options. Hoerster, who also chaired

the prior St. Nicholas Exploratory Committee, observed, “Affordable housing provides an extraordinary opportunity to fulfill the Cathedral’s mission objectives, meet community needs, and provide opportunities for parish engagement. To say the least, it is a far better fit than market rate housing.”

One of the unique features for affordable housing on campus is not just increasing access and inventory but to do so in such an indelible location and place on North Capitol Hill. Saint Mark’s physical location would connect future residents to strong schools, accessible green space, great public transit services, proximity to commercial services and stunning westerly views. And, said Hoerster, “We envision a project that would fit architecturally on the campus, is climate impact neutral or better, and fulfills the Cathedral’s mission objectives.”

While there is much work and assessment still needed, and no decision has been made, the Committee, along with a development consultant, have made great strides in initial feasibility to further refine development capacity and scaling through design and site analysis contextualized in the Cathedral’s vision and mission.

During this exploratory work, Hulet said that the Committee has been guided by Saint Mark’s Mutual Ministry goals, considering a foundational human need of the security of a place to call home (Restorative Justice and Systemic Change), a community of people of all ages and spaces for people to gather (Intergenerational and Innovative Community), and the methods in which Saint Mark’s can most sustainably care and steward its buildings and property (Creation Care and Carbon Reduction).

The Committee’s momentum has been supported by an initial grant from Enterprise Community Partners to assist with feasibility work. The Cathedral has also applied for an additional grant from Trinity Church Wall Street, whose Gift of Place program helps congregations, such as St. Luke’s in Ballard, steward their property for vital social impact.

Both Enterprise Community Partners and Trinity Church Wall Street are leaders in equipping faith-based organizations with tools and resources to use their location to embody their unique calling through the land. These partnerships are key because navigating the process of affordable housing development is not without challenge or complexity.

“We are delighted with our collaborative partners in this effort, as conversation partners, sharing expertise, wise counsel, and resources that have helped refine the focus of our potential project,” said Dean Steve Thomason.

LEARN MORE

There will be two forums in September to learn more about the project exploration, meet with committee members and cathedral leadership, share input and hear about next steps ahead. No decisions have been made, and the Vestry seeks input from the parish in the process ahead.

- ♦ Wednesday Evening, September 13, 6:45–8:15 p.m., in Bloedel Hall or via Zoom, with the option to attend a community dinner at 6 p.m.
- ♦ Sunday Morning, September 24, 10:10–10:50 a.m., in Bloedel Hall

To learn more visit: saintmarks.org/affordablehousing or email affordablehousing@saintmarks.org

At the heart of the exploration is a desire to continue the work of cultivating community within a neighborhood—where people of all ages can live, work, connect, and play. For years the Cathedral campus has been an adaptive common space that has brought people together, nurtured relationships, and generated deep connections. Now Saint Mark’s is positioned for a new possibility—welcoming generations of residents to affordable opportunities of place for years to come.

“We are clear that this initiative, should it come to pass, will be grounded in a commitment to see future residents as our neighbors whose presence will enrich the common life that takes shape on the cathedral campus,” said Thomason. “We see dignity, respect, and mutuality as abiding values that will guide the relationships.” ♦

NOTES

1. From August 2020 to February 2022, the St. Nicholas Exploratory Committee explored the possibility of market rate housing on the St. Nicholas site. Ultimately, the Committee and Vestry rejected market rate housing because it did not produce revenue to support mission-related initiatives at the level that had been projected by the Cathedral’s real estate advisors and because it was not a good fit with the Cathedral’s mission. In reaching this decision, the Committee identified affordable housing as a valuable, mission-positive alternative, but out of scope for the committee’s focus on assessing market rate housing.
2. <https://www.jchs.harvard.edu/son-2021-cost-burdens-map>
3. <https://www.realtor.com/news/trends/how-much-first-time-homebuyers-need-to-earn-to-purchase-a-starter-home/>
4. Seattle Times/Suffolk University Poll, June 2022.
5. The St. Nicholas site is zoned NR3 (neighborhood residential), but Seattle Municipal Code 23.42.055 provides a substantial density bonus for affordable housing located on property owned or controlled by a religious organization.