

Newton City Council backs plan to restore Grace Church bell tower

By **Shaun Robinson** Boston University journalist, Updated March 13, 2021, 4:09 p.m.



Grace Episcopal Church in Newton Corner. SHAUN ROBINSON

Newton will spend nearly \$1.5 million in preservation grants to repair and restore the bell tower of Grace Episcopal Church, the city council voted March 1, marking the first time councilors have allocated Community Preservation Act funds to a religious organization.

The 17-5 decision came after what councilors described as a rush of public support for the project, which church leaders said could now be underway by the summer. Project

the project, which church leaders said could now be under way by the summer. Project advocates had maintained that barring a seven-figure contribution from the city, the 19th-century tower likely would get torn down.

The Community Preservation Act is a state measure allowing cities and towns to levy a surcharge to support historic preservation efforts, along with open space, affordable housing, and recreation projects. In Newton, the surcharge is 1 percent on property taxes. The state provides partially matching funds.

“We’re absolutely thrilled,” said Leah Gasset, chair of the church’s governing board, in an interview. “I think it’s a tremendous opportunity for the city and our community to partner and be able to make something happen that neither of us would have been able to do on our own.”

Grace Church, which borders Farlow Park in Newton Corner, first took its request public before the city’s Community Preservation Committee [in September](#). Debate over the proposal sometimes lasted hours, spanning multiple city council and committee meetings.

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Newton will pay half of the project’s roughly \$2.9 million estimated cost, with the church

matching the other half through donations as well as grants from organizations such as

the Massachusetts Historical Commission. Gasset said the city's financial commitment gives the church greater leverage to secure additional funding from other donors.

The city's funds will come entirely from Community Preservation Act money that is reserved for historic preservation projects. Once a contractor is selected, [work](#) will take place in two phases: first, reinforcing the tower with steel, and second, restoring its aging stonework.

At-Large Councillor Alison Leary said at the meeting March 1 she saw the project as an opportunity to protect a significant piece of the city's history, calling Grace Church "a cornerstone of Newton Corner."

"No one can doubt that much of the history of New England is tied up in our churches, and I think we have to honor that history," Leary said in defense of the project. "To me it's not so much, 'This is a church.' To me this is an architectural gem."

City officials previously had said they were concerned the church, as private property of a religious organization, did not provide enough public benefits to receive public money. Last fall, the city's Law Department [said](#) a court could find a decision to fund the project in violation of the Anti-Aid Amendment to the state's constitution, [which describes](#) how public funds cannot be used to aid a religious organization.

In 2018, however, the state's Supreme Judicial Court [ruled](#) a church could receive taxpayer money if the funds did not support the church's core religious activities. Grace Church has argued since the tower bears no religious imagery and is not used for worship, its project is constitutionally permissible.

The church has pledged to councillors it will boost its engagement with the city going forward, said Scott Aquilina, manager of the restoration project, in an interview. This could include putting on secular bell concerts, Gasset said, or installing signage detailing

the building's history.

Some councillors said at the meeting March 1 they felt it was risky to allocate such a large amount of the city's historic preservation money to a single project, regardless of its merits. At-Large Councillor Deborah Crossley said she understood Grace Church's need, but she was concerned funding the project could set a precedent for other historic churches that Newton is not in a position to handle.

"It is our responsibility to our taxpaying public to exercise responsible fiscal constraint," Crossley said at the meeting. "Doing this now without a plan, I think, would open a door to an ocean of similar need that we'd be unable to fill at our 1 percent CPA surcharge."

Grace Church is far from the first religious organization to receive Community Preservation Act funding in the state. At least six projects involving churches were approved for preservation grants in Boston last year, and in October, Needham Town Meeting [approved preservation funding](#) for a church's bell tower.

Still, Newton's \$1.43 million grant is comparatively large. No church in the state received more than \$1 million of public preservation funds between 2018 and 2020, according to [data](#) from the Community Preservation Coalition, an organization that advocates for the Community Preservation Act.

Ward 1 Councilor Maria Scibelli Greenberg, who represents Newton Corner, said at the meeting it is important to protect the neighborhood's historic landmarks since so many nearby buildings were razed in the 1960s to build the Massachusetts Turnpike through the city.

"The church tower represents a unique and important connection between the residents of Newton Corner and their surroundings. There is no other place like this in Newton," Greenberg said. "The residents of Ward 1 are proud of this distinction and strongly support the preservation of Grace Church."

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