

Parking crunch poses challenge for proposed Lambertville Music Hall

Published: Friday, October 26, 2012, 5:51 PM Updated: Friday, October 26, 2012, 5:51 PM



Cristina Rojas/Hunterdon County Democrat

By



[Enlarge](#)

Cristina Rojas/Hunterdon County Democrat

Oct. 25, 2012: Lambertville Music Hall application gallery (30 photos)

LAMBERTVILLE — For nearly a century and a half the First Baptist Church has stood tall on Bridge Street, but it was put up for sale last year when its dwindling congregation could no longer keep up with the cost of maintaining and restoring the 144-year-old building.

Now a nonprofit family foundation dedicated to rescuing historic landmarks and giving them new life has plans to turn the Romanesque Revival church — with its gabled roof, square tower and stained glass windows — into a music hall with a restaurant and bar.

But one of the project's biggest hurdles lies ahead as the foundation tries to convince members of the board of adjustment and the public that there is ample parking in the 1.1-square-mile city to accommodate the proposed 450-seat venue.

The foundation founded by Bucks County, Pa., couple Kevin and Sherri Daugherty and led by Tanya Cooper is also responsible for the revitalization of the Bucks County Playhouse.

Under the plan, proposed by Bridge Street Foundation, the sanctuary and choir loft would be converted into the music hall and host local, regional and national acts. The building's main floor, which currently houses a meeting space, would become the restaurant and bar and the basement would include an expanded kitchen, storage and utility rooms and instructional space to support community-based programs.

The music hall would be open Friday and Saturday from 8 to 11 p.m. and for a Sunday matinee performance from 4 to 7 p.m.

The restaurant and bar would be open seven days a week and serve brunch on weekends. While state law prohibits liquor licenses for businesses that are within 200 feet of a church or school, the Diocese of Metuchen said it was not opposed to the project, which would be across the street from St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church and its Jesus School.

The restaurant and bar would give the foundation the ability to generate cash flow to support the theater.

"In order for these nonprofits to thrive and continue to serve the community through quality programming, we need to have a self-sustaining business model," Cooper said. "We don't want to cannibalize other fundraising."

They plan to apply to City Council to mark the three parking spaces in front of the building as barrier-free for loading, unloading and valet service, said Michael Burns, the architect for the project.

The concept is largely embraced, but the board and residents voiced concerns about the lack of parking and worry that the venue would lead to more traffic and congestion on Bridge Street.

Burns said the venue needs 219 spaces, but reduced that number to 122 after deducting the 97 spaces that were grandfathered in for the church, albeit nonexistent.

"When the church was using that more fully to its capacity, which is what they're basing the parking on, it was a different time in Lambertville and much has happened since then," board planner Linda Weber said. "I don't think we can just blindly grandfather in spaces by a mere formulaic response. It takes a little more thinking about what this means."

Burns said that the foundation has letters of intent with Diamond Silver and St. John to provide parking options. Diamond Silver, three-quarters of a mile from the venue on Arnett Avenue, would provide 110 spaces and a shuttle bus service would bus patrons to the venue. An additional 50 spaces in the church's parking lot would be reserved for valet parking, but Burns said they could stack up to 75 cars.

"Before there's going to be any kind of vote, there is going to be an agreement with both Diamond Silver and St. John because we can't talk about possible parking," board attorney Bill Shurts said. "There's going to have to be real parking to accommodate some real cars."

St. John would have the power to cancel within 72 hours, he noted, adding "that will not get it done."

Richard Mongelli, the applicant's attorney, said nobody has a bigger incentive to provide parking than the foundation.

"If we can't provide that, we're going to have one-time visitors and we're not going to survive," he said.

Board member Sara Scully said patrons would park on residential streets, causing a major inconvenience for residents who won't be able to find parking in front of their houses.

"This is a big project that has the potential to change the quality of life for people that live here," said Lisa Nichols, a resident and partner of DeAnna's Restaurant and Bar. "I think it's fantastic to renovate a beautiful historic church in our lovely little city, but this is not New Hope and that's part of the beauty of our little town here."

Resident Larry Simms said idling cars waiting for valet service will block traffic and at the close of a performance, an audience of 450 will pour out into the street.

Resident Ken Vaughn said the venue would be a major change for the city and the board has to weigh whether it is an appropriate amount of change or too much change.

"What they're doing is great, but there is a byproduct that the city has to deal with and that's parking and the traffic," he said. "Even with their best attempts ... it's going to create a lot of traffic and it's going to create problems with residents parking anywhere near their house."

The next meeting is set for 7:30 p.m. Nov. 29 in the Justice Center, 25 S. Union Street.

More Hunterdon County news: [NJ.com/hunterdon](#) • [Facebook](#) • [Twitter](#)