

The First Unitarian Universalist Church of Essex County

35 & 47 Cleveland Street
Orange, New Jersey 07050

(973) 674-0010
www.firstuu.essex.nj.uua.org

March 10, 2010

Dear Mr. Lander:

I am writing in support of the landmarking of West-Park Presbyterian Church.

From 1989-99 I served as minister of the Fourth Universalist Society on Central Park West, which received landmark status by virtue of its inclusion in its historic district. During my ministry and ever since, this congregation has benefitted and survived because of the cooperation with its neighbors that landmarking invited. It is now home to a thriving congregation as well as being a well-known venue for a variety of events of use to the entire city and beyond.

On one level, landmarking West-Park simply corrects an historical and political omission. Of greater importance, it provides the opportunity for the congregation and its neighbors to move from conflict to cooperation. New solutions to the struggle between development and community need to be found. This neighborhood can add to those who have found livable answers.

Furthermore, should the congregation so chose, a hardship process is spelled out in the landmarking laws. For years some religious property owners have complained that this process has never been successful, without a single one willing to bring forth a good faith attempt. Again, this is an opportunity for those who oppose landmarking to have their day and their recourse, rather than simply continuing to play the victim, while failing to face the real world demands of their historic buildings and the legitimate concerns of their neighbors.

Again, I urge that the Council uphold the well-researched and carefully considered decision to landmark West-Park Presbyterian Church. Please let me know if I can be of any help in this process.

Sincerely,

Rev. Darrell Berger

Minister, First Unitarian Universalist Church of Essex County, Orange, New Jersey

A church where every mind is free and every soul is welcome!

Rev. Darrell Berger
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June 25, 2009

Dear Mr. Tierney:

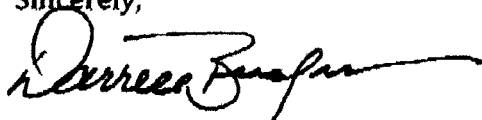
Thank you so much for holding hearings on West-Park Presbyterian Church. At long last the community and the congregation will be able to engage in a process of mutual consideration.

Of course, this is likely to be only the beginning of a process that should have begun decades ago.

As minister of the Fourth Universalist Society on Central Park West from 1989-99, I am very aware of the benefits and responsibilities of caring for a landmarked religious building, and ministering through it to both the local community and the world. I am happy to participate in these hearings in any way that might prove helpful.

I am now serving my third congregation residing in an historic building, and am well-versed in the process of helping these groups survive with history, real estate and mission intact.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Darrell Berger", with a long, sweeping horizontal line extending to the right.

Rev. Darrell Berger



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November 5, 2007

Dear Mr. Tierney:

From 1989-99, I served the Fourth Universalist Society on Central Park West, landmarked as part of its Historic District. Since leaving that ministry, I have remained an active advocate of the landmarking of deserving religious properties. I am currently serving a congregation that owns a 1893 Arts and Crafts building and is actively engaged in its preservation and renovation.

I encourage you to hold hearings concerning whether West-Park Presbyterian Church, 86th St. & Amsterdam Ave., should become a landmark. This should have been done long ago as part of its Historic District.

I recently met with a number of community leaders, who shared with me their innovative ideas for preservation and fundraising to aid this congregation. However, their efforts have not been successful, as the congregation and, perhaps, its presbytery, have other plans which do not take into account either the historic significance of the building or the good will of their neighbors.

Too often religious organizations believe their self-defined community obligations can be met without community dialogue. Landmarking is one way to initiate this dialogue. I know from my experience at The Universalist Society that many benefits can derive from this dialogue. I do not believe either the Universalist congregation, nor its building, would have survived without landmarking.

Please do not hesitate to call on me for further discussion of this or any related issue.

Thank you for your attention.

Sincerely,

Rev. Darrell Berger
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April 11, 2007

To: The Honorable Jerrold Nadler

From: The Rev. Darrell E. Berger

Re: The Landmarking of Religious Properties

Due to a family commitment I cannot attend the meeting of Friday, April 13, 2007, 3 PM in your office. Please accept the following in my absence.

From 1989-99 I served as minister of the Fourth Universalist Society on 76th St. and Central Park West, which owns and occupies a landmarked, neo-gothic cathedral built in 1898. For decades a dwindling congregation struggled with maintenance and renovation costs, and doubts about its future. In the 1980's, a separate non-for-profit organization, S.O.U.L. (Save Our Universalist Landmark), with board members from both the congregation and the community, raised money to provide vitally needed repairs.

More importantly, it also provided friendships, networks, and expertise that enabled the Society to solve many of its long-standing problems of cash flow, building use and congregational self-worth. While it did not deliver an endless flow of free money, so often promised by developers who only want to destroy your building to save it, it delivered more: preservation of the building, a re-invigorated mission for the Society, and a sense of accomplishment and community in the neighborhood.

Unfortunately, the New York City landmarking process is no longer likely to bring about such benefits, for either sacred sites or their neighbors, for the following reasons:

- 1) The Landmarks Preservation Committee no longer takes seriously the needs of the surrounding community. A congregation is unlikely to volunteer its building for landmarking, as it does limit their ability to make the maximum amount of money from its property, and requires listening its neighbors.
- 2) In cases like West-Park Presbyterian, when the local community tries to speak with the leadership of a congregation intending to develop without neighborhood approval, even when they succeed in having a conversation, they are not speaking to the ultimate decision makers. In Presbyterian, Episcopal, Methodist, and Roman Catholic organizations, to

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name a few; the local congregation does not have full control or ownership of its property.

There needs to be some process where local communities can speak with and influence denominational decision-makers, whose interests often seem to be in cutting losses by closing local churches, as for example the Roman Catholic parishes recently closed, even over the objection of parish members, or, transforming the properties from landmarked sacred sites to cash cows of commercial or residential real estate.

Each individual sacred site owner may have what it understands to be totally valid reasons for destroying its landmark. Each represents only one site in a vast city. But with denominational bureaucrats performing ecclesiastical triage on its weakest congregations, and developers eagerly awaiting each property as it falls, there is a dangerous trend that leaves ordinary citizens with no method of participating in essential decision-making that dominates their communities and their homes. The separation of church and state does not exempt religious groups from basic neighborly responsibilities.

We hope there may be some ideas, directions, and support your office can provide to balance the scales in the landmarking of sacred sites in New York City. Thank you very much for your attention.

-Rev. Darrell Berger