

Cathedral Expects New Revenue, and Controversy, in Residential Tower Deal

By Robin Finn

Jan. 27, 2012

After years of inactivity, the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine is completing a lease agreement to bring a second residential tower — and a second stream of revenue — to its verdant 11-acre campus and famously unfinished cathedral. A 2013 groundbreaking is planned.

Inevitably, a new round of controversy will follow: preservationists have long criticized the 2003 deal between the Landmarks Preservation Commission and St. John the Divine that allowed the church to lease parcels on its northern and southern perimeter to developers.

The first piece of the development puzzle, a \$130 million, 20-story glass tower called Avalon Morningside Park, was completed in 2008 on the southeast corner of the church property at 110th Street. The building comprises 295 rental apartments, 59 of them subsidized, the rest renting at market rates.

The new agreement raises the specter of a second for-profit tower impinging on the Gothic stone silhouette of the church, whose cornerstone was laid in 1892. No significant work has been done on the cathedral building in close to 30 years.

The dean of the Cathedral Church, the Very Rev. James A. Kowalski, said he was resigned to being castigated for the pending construction but was not apologetic about the need for it: "I'm not surprised when I hear from people who say, 'You're too lazy to raise money any other way,' but that opinion is simply incorrect." Dean Kowalski said that after the north transept of the cathedral was gutted and its historic organ damaged by a fire late in 2001, church leaders realized they needed to seek outside income.

Church officials struck a deal with the Landmarks Preservation Commission to designate the cathedral and its grounds as a landmark, but to remove the two parcels of land from consideration for landmark designation. The City Council twice refused to accept that deal, saying the entire property should be a landmark. The Cathedral Close, as the property is known, has never been officially made a landmark, though church officials say they fully favor the designation — with the exception of the two perimeter sites.

The new arrangement between the cathedral and Equity Residence, the developer that intends to build a 12- to 14-story apartment building on the church-owned parcel on 113th Street between Amsterdam Avenue and Morningside Drive, follows a three-year development hiatus caused by Columbia University's decision not to exercise its option on the north site. But church officials maintain that their plan to generate income through commercial leases was always two-pronged.

The 99-year lease with Avalon generates \$2.7 million in annual income for St. John the Divine, which has an operating budget of \$9 million for the cathedral building alone, said Mr. Kowalski (there are six major structures on the Close). The Equity Residence building is expected to generate a similar revenue.

"I supported the cathedral's plan to develop the southeast corner of their property," said Brad Taylor, an architect who is co-chairman of the Waterfront, Parks and Recreation Committee of Community Board 9. "However, I feel that this northern parcel is so close to the cathedral that it warrants full protection. The fact that Morningside Heights has no historic district is shameful."

The site, not far from the emergency room entrance of St. Luke's Hospital, is occupied by a parking lot and construction sheds left over from a previous project. The Columbia Spectator first reported the deal on Jan. 20. According to the paper, Steve Facey, executive vice president of cathedral administration, described the 113th Street building site as an eyesore bordering on "a brownfield" and said adding an apartment building would be "an improvement."

"We are a different kind of operation from a congregation-based church," Mr. Facey said Friday. "We have not sold any of our property or torn down any of our buildings. What this leasing arrangement does for the church, and for the neighborhood it's in, is like creating a long-term endowment that enables us to sustain our mission."

Several community groups in Morningside Heights, where sentiment runs strong for the establishment of a historic district stretching from Morningside Park to Riverside Park, have already vowed to fight the second apartment tower.

Daniel O'Donnell, the district's assemblyman and a longtime advocate for a Morningside Heights historic district, including the entire Cathedral Close, complained of "the bad behavior of the Cathedral Church" and the "ineptitude of the Landmarks Preservation Commission."

"It's deplorable and a travesty to the neighborhood," he said. "To be honest, I'm very distressed, most of all because there's no mechanism to stop it."

In an e-mail, Elisabeth de Bourbon, spokeswoman for the Landmarks Commission, said only that "the timeline for designating the important historic resources at this site is under active review."

A public hearing on the project is set for Feb. 21 at the Synod Hall on the church grounds. Gregory Dietrich, a preservationist and adviser to the Morningside Heights Historic District Committee, said he hoped the public would make its opinion known: "This institution is one of the reasons that Morningside Heights has historically promoted itself as the 'Acropolis of the New World.' But these towers are not part of that vision of what the neighborhood should be."