



# Minutes

November 5, 2018

The City of Alexandria Zoning Board of Adjustments and Appeals (ZBAA) met in the City Council Chambers on November 5, 2018, at 4:00 P.M., pursuant to requests for ZBAA recommendations for the City Council.

**Members Present:** Mr. Mike Bordelon, Chairperson  
Mr. Jack Hodges  
Mr. Bryon Salazar  
Mr. Tim Dousay

**Also Present:** Robert Bussey  
Ruth Basco  
Delores Brewer  
Andrea Guillot

Meeting was opened at 4:00 P.M. Roll call was taken and there was a quorum.

## ITEM #1

An application has been submitted on behalf of First United Methodist Church of Alexandria, represented herein by Reverend Ashley McGuire requesting a SPECIAL EXCEPTION to allow a Columbarium in an existing Prayer Garden. The property is located at 2727 Jackson Street, Alexandria and described as:

-4.34 ACS: FRTG 484' ON JACKSON ST BEING PART OF PETRUS EST. AT SECTION 35- TOWNSHIP 04N- RANGE 01 W RAPIDES PARISH, LOUISIANA. \*\*\*PARCEL I.D. 24-35-35238-10\*\*\*

Applicant's property is in a "SF-2" Single Family Density District and thus requires a SPECIAL EXCEPTION.

Mr. Bordelon states the application for the columbarium is allowed within "SF-2" zoning, but wanted to get clarification about it being classified as a cemetery with a special exception. Ms. Brewer states that there was no definition for columbarium in the Code, and they had to choose between a cemetery or a church. She adds that a church is allowed in any zone in the city and a cemetery is only allowed in certain areas. In order for a columbarium to be in an "SF-2", it has to have a special exception, which is what is trying to be accomplished today.

Mr. Charles S. Weems, III, attorney, speaks on behalf of The First United Methodist Church of Alexandria. He begins by saying he's a citizen and member of First United Methodist Church, and a neighbor. Also stating he's a concerned citizen as well. Mr. Weems states that they are there today to consider whether or not the First Methodist Church, in its existing Prayer Garden, can put a memorial wall behind which, invisibly, will reside the ashes of loved ones of members of the church. He adds that it's tastefully done and has little to no impact and has no environmental effect. Mr. Weems states that it won't be seen from the road and it's as tasteful and beautiful as you could possibly do to anything of this kind.

Mr. Weems presents a letter from a local realtor about this columbarium not affecting property values which he gives to the commission. He states that Mr. Noles, the realtor, investigated other cities where this occurs and he concluded that in most of the communities, they didn't even know they were there. He adds that it's a modern thing that has been added that he appreciates. Mr. Weems tells the commission that St. Timothys Episcopal has a columbarium as a memorial and there has been no adverse affect there. He states that it's important to this church and a blessing to its members. He names some of the church members who would like to speak and welcomes questions. He states that it's important to this church and a blessing to its members. He names some of the church members who would like to speak and welcomes questions.

Mr. Bussey states that the application talks about 4.34 acres being given the special exception. He further asks if the Church would agree to just have the special exception apply to only the Prayer Garden so that you couldn't put columbariums other places. Reverend (Older Male Voice)\*\*\* agreed if that was the only contention. Mr. Bussey shares that he thinks some of the worry here is that if this is allowed then perhaps caskets could go someplace too. Mr. Bussey then asks if the Church would also agree that this exception would only be for ashes and never a casket or anything else. Reverend (Older Male Voice)\*\*\* agrees.

Reverend Ashley McGuire, Senior Paster at First United Methodist Church, 6005 Hannah Drive, approaches the podium.

Reverend McGuire shares that this project has been near and dear to the people in her church and understands that it's been a conversation around the neighborhood. She states that she's tried reaching out to neighbors, and reiterates that it's not for physical bodies. It's for cremation remains, ashes, and will be concealed behind black solid

granite. She adds that historically cemeteries were a part of church plots and members maintained their membership to be buried in their home church; however, she assures that this will not be a cemetery and they are asking for the exception solely for the columbarium in that specific space of the Prayer Garden. She states that it would be for their members, pastors, or employees to have a final resting place, it's not being advertised commercially.

Reverend McGuire shared that she found no reason from a religious or safety standpoint this couldn't be done. She spoke of a meeting in the Garden District about sanitation, and one of the gentlemen that was there on behalf of the neighborhood wasn't a member of the church, she had never met him, worked with one of the local headstone companies and learned that columbariums are actually environmentally friendly. She also states that after speaking with funeral home directors in the area, there is a much needed space for places like this because there is only so much land and there are only so many cemeteries. Reverend McGuire shares that this is a way for the church to provide for the community, as well as for the members of its church.

Mr. Bordelon address Mr. White about construction and life expectancy questions that the board will most likely have after receiving correspondence. Mr. Bordelon asks Mr. White to explain the construction of the walls. Mr. White states that the memorial walls are built of brick, concrete and granite. He adds that the actual function of the columbarium is behind those walls. He explains there is an eight inch by eight inch granite plate that has the information, and then behind that you place gold boxes that adhere permanently. So the function isn't visible to anyone, including members of the church. Mr. Bordelon verifies that the ashes will be contained within the boxes and Mr. White confirms and explains the many containers the ashes are encased in.

Mr. White is also asked by Mr. Bordelon how many niches are being proposed, and answers 640 niches and explains the different sections of walls. The interior has around 440 niches that are not in eye's view, and states that glimpses can be seen of two exterior walls, with about 100 niches on each, in public view. Mr. White is asked how tall the walls are, and he goes on to describe that they are 14 feet tall on the bayou side and 8 foot tall on the lowest part. He adds they are made of brick and stone and concrete and iron. Mr. Bordelon asks the life expectancy and Mr. White states as long as there's no earthquake or anything.

Mr. Bordelon asks if something happens to the church, what will happen to the columbarium. Mr. Weems (Not sure if it's him)\*\*\* states that they would take it with them. They would either find a place or they would ask it be returned. Mr. Bordelon states that they visited the Prayer Garden previously and describes the locked gates entering the garden. The only access to the Prayer gate will be from inside the church. Mr. White is asked by Mr. Bordelon if the columbariums are maintenance free and he confirms that yes, they are. The Prayer Garden only needs flowers maintained.

Mr. Bordelon asks if there are any questions. Mr. Hodges asks if there will only be the one phase with 640 niches. Mr. White advises they are only asking for the 640

right now. The church would come back on the potential second phase before the Board but they don't see a need for that for 10 or 20 years. They aren't asking for approval on any second phase at this time. Mr. Bordelon confirms that these niches are offered to the members of the church and employees. Mr. White advises members, pastors, employees, and spouses. Mr. White confirms that two family members can be placed into one box.

Mr. Bordelon asks who designs and develop the specifications for construction of the boxes and Mr. White confirms that the company that they buy them from will handle that. They are built with a concrete construction, kind of like cubicles that look like an egg crate.

Mr. Dousay, again, raises the biggest concern voiced to him that if the church were relocated in the future the Board should create a special exception that they allow that piece of property to be advertised like an approved cemetery that could be turned into a commercial space sometime in the future. This currently would be an approval only for the existing Prayer Garden. Mr. White confirms that. The church's intent is to be there for centuries.

Mr. Bussey asks if the brochures Mr. White gave out to members of the Board would be submitted into evidence and he advises that they would be put into the record and that is done. Mr. Bordelon states he is aware that there are a couple of people that are opposed to this and asks Dr. Wold if he would like to speak. Mr. Bussey has two letters, one from Wilton and Connie Guillory, and they are proponents of the project. He introduces that letter into evidence. The Guillorys stated that they live nearby and they are in favor of the project.

Dr. Howard Wold speaks next and he and his wife live at 1002 City Park Boulevard, adjacent to the church property and they share a parking lot on the back of their property, and a gate. The Wold's concern about the project is that the area is residential and they would like to keep it that way. They worry about a risk that this could become a commercial enterprise in the future. The concrete walls can be scaled he is concerned about potential vandalism and damage to the columbariums so security is an issue for them. He believes the church's property on Hill Street could be used for expansion if they were zoned as a burial area. In sum, they strongly object to the exemption being granted. Dr. Howard Wold asks who would be responsible for drafting the limitations on the zoning exemption and Mr. Bordelon advises it would be placed in the motion today. The Board is going through the process to try to be ready to do that today. Dr. Wold believes the requested restrictions should be scrutinized before any motion/vote. Dr. Howard also has a letter from his neighbor, Mr. Percy, and presents that to the Board.

One of the letters is from Christine Head at 2704 Hill Street, and Christine addresses the Board. She states there is additional information presented at each meeting held relating to this project and now today is of the understanding that four acres are including in this special exception and she doesn't know where those four acres are located. She needs clarification on where the four acres begin and end.

Mr. Bordelon advises that Mr. White stated that the request for the exception is within the Prayer Garden itself. Mr. Bordelon read the legal description of the entire ownership, but this project is confined to the Prayer Garden. Ms. Head states that some of the homeowners feel they weren't approached and explained what is involved and they weren't asked if they had input; concerned that it's creating animosity among neighbors and friends. Mr. Bordelon asks for Ms. Head's concerns and she states her major concern is acts of God and nature. She spoke about tornadoes destroying outside structures. She believes it would be safer if moved inside the church. Another concern is that her property value could decrease. She advised that if she decides to sell her house at a later date and the property value has decreased she will seek legal representation. She will submit her neighborhood petition into evidence and a letter dated November 5, 2018.

Mrs. Betty Ingrish approaches the podium. Ms. Ingrish lives at 2715 Marye Street, her property adjoins the First United Methodist Church parking lot. She stated her biggest issues is that as of 48 hours prior to this meeting she had never heard of this project and this should have been discussed with her. She would like confirmation of what is considered 100 feet. She is against the project because she is uninformed to be able to speak any other way.

Mr. Bordelon calls Dr. Don Edgerton to speak. Mr. Bordelon advises Dr. Edgerton he needed to sign in to the meeting and did not. Dr. Edgerton approaches the podium. Dr. Edgerton lives at 2627 Jackson Street right across City Park Boulevard, from the church. He's lived there 41 years. He states the district he lives in is known for its residential nature. He believes this special permit is required for a reason and his question is, are the niches going to be sold. Mr. Weems(I don't know)\*\*\* advises that, yes, they will. Ms. (I don't know)\*\*\* also states that. Mr. Weems\*\*\* states that they will only be sold within the membership so Dr. Edgerton believes that their being paid for the niches makes it commercial. Dr. Edgerton is against the niches but the Prayer Garden is fine.

Mr. White approached the podium to clarify that they are not asking for a rezoning for commercial zoning, they only ask for a special exemption for this one function just to the confines of the Prayer Garden. He addresses Mrs. Ingrish and advises she may not have been informed because it involves a certain tract of property; it's not the original church property.

Mr. Salazar asks to address the concerns involving the potential for the Bayou to rise and their thoughts. Mr. White talks about the 500-year flood and states that the water was five to six feet below the base of the Prayer Garden walls. For the water to breach the wall it would have to rise another 12 feet to get to the columbarium. Mr. Bussey stated that someone brought up the aquatic club and tornadoes that occurred. Mr. White states the wall is cinderblock, so the Prayer Garden is built to have a much higher level of strength and durability.

Mr. Salazar asks Mr. White if the church is willing to consider any additional buffering in terms of landscaping and Mr. White responds yes. Mr. White has no objection to the neighbors' desire to completely hide the Prayer Garden and can add additional landscaping. Mr. Bordelon asks about the ironwork and asks if that could be taken care of or addressed. Some of the large trees were taken out but from City Park Boulevard it's hard to see the Prayer Garden. His concern is that when the leaves fall they would need to buffer it. Mr. White advised they are going to put some Japanese Maples and those are deciduous trees and are being put for screening and beauty. They could also put coniferous trees. Mr. Hodges asks about additional security as scalable walls were mentioned. He'd like to know if additional security could be added to protect that. They have plans to put a camera out there to be incorporated into the church's current video surveillance. The Prayer Garden has been in its current state for almost a year and unlocked and they have had no issues with that.

Mr. Bordelon goes back to Ms. Christine Head being concerned about Phase 2, and Mr. White advises they are willing to limit that and that they do not know at this time if that will come to pass. If Phase 2 is desired they will bring that issue to the Board at that time. Mr. White, again, assures everyone it will only be located within the Prayer Garden itself.

Mr. Bordelon asks for any other questions and Mr. (I don't know)\*\*\* adds that this granting of an exception is a precedent and that his understanding of St. Timothy is that it's inside the church. He asks what will Zoning or the City do if the church comes later and asks for a cemetery. He believes if this exemption is made it will be hard to deny them or any other group additional exemptions and Mr. Bordelon states that this cannot be answered at this time. He also doesn't know how they can stop the situation of membership being exchanged for purchase of a columbarium spot. He believes that opens the door for an aspect of commercial exploitation of this situation.

Mr. White states in response to that that the church doesn't need a commercial zoning to sell this to their members. Mr. (I don't know)\*\*\* states that previously discussed was an arrangement to make sure that the facility was cared for in perpetuity and about funds being set aside for that and Mr. White confirms that is correct. Mr. White stated they were thinking about a Million Dollars to be set for perpetual maintenance.

Chair will entertain a motion. Mr. Dousay asks for advice from their attorney on the correct wording of a motion and Mr. Bussey says that they will not need advice on a motion to deny. If it's a motion to approve and they want to put certain covenants or restrictions then he directs them to the brochure that was handed out and say that it's limited to the Prayer Garden as depicted in the brochure, that there's no extension beyond that, and that it's limited to placing of ashes in the columbarium wall. State that they cannot have any caskets or any type of human remains other than the ashes going into the columbarium's wall. Mr. Bussey adds to limit the motion to Phase 1 only and specify that they would have to come back to the Board to do anything relative to a Phase 2. Mr. Bussey advises that they can add that for vandalism purposes that they have to put in

cameras. They could request that they go back with some wrought iron and put something pointed on top of wall to make it less susceptible to vandalism.

Mr. Bordelon asks if Mr. White has the specifications for the walls and he advises that he does have them but doesn't have them at the meeting. Mr. Bussey requests that the previous meeting evidence be reintroduced and Mr. Bordelon agrees.

Ms. Brewer asks to confirm that when Mr. White says columbarium that is restricted to a loved one's ashes. Mr. White advises that is correct. The application is specific to columbarium.

Mr. Bordelon asks how long it would take to establish the perpetual funds prior to occupying the columbarium. Mr. White believes all funds coming in would be dedicated to that Prayer Garden until they reach a certain number. He believes it will take five to ten years to sell all the niches, and decades to actually have people's ashes in there.

Mr. (I don't know)\*\*\* asks if Mr. Bordelon is asking what the status of what the perpetuity maintenance funds are at this point in time and Mr. Bordelon clarifies he wants to know what the plan is to establish it. That will be to take all the funds that they get and dedicate that to the Prayer Garden and the columbarium. Mr. (I don't know)\*\*\* asks how much that would be per occupant and Mr. White advises each niche is \$3,000.00 and you can put two people in a single niche, so the husband and wife could go into a single niche. At 640 boxes that would be 1.8 Million Dollars.

Chair states he will accept a motion at this time. Mr. Dousay states he is not sure about the details of the wording but he will offer a motion that they grant a special exemption as long as it is limited to the Prayer Garden as permitted and as presented to the Board, and that the church will agree to add some evergreen to increase the screening effect of that Prayer Garden. Mr. Hodges seconds motion with an add-on that it's only for Phase 1. Mr. Dousay accepts the amendment to the motion and adds the additional cameras they would like added to the Prayer Garden

Motion presented, seconded by Mr. Hodges. Roll call is taken to confirm vote. Mr. Salazar votes no, all other members present vote yes.

Mr. Hodges makes a motion to accept the minutes from the last meeting. Mr. Salazar seconds. Motion passes.

Mr. Hodges makes a motion to adjourn, seconded by Mr. Dousay. Meeting adjourned at 5:00 p.m. Meeting adjourned.



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Chairman