

Controversial Kansas Abortion Clinic to Reopen This Spring

Closed since 2009 after its doctor was murdered, one of the country's most embattled abortion clinics is scheduled to reopen this spring over renewed objections of abortion opponents.

Controversy over the clinic in Wichita, Kans., is building as the country observes the 40th anniversary on Tuesday of the *Roe v. Wade* U.S. Supreme Court ruling that made abortion legal in at least the first three months of pregnancy.

An abortion-rights group bought the building where George Tiller was among only a few doctors in the country to do late-term abortions before he was gunned down at a Wichita church. Scott Roeder is serving a life sentence after testifying that he killed Tiller, 67, to stop abortions.

Tiller owned the clinic and his family decided to close it down and withdraw from any involvement there after his murder.

Anti-abortion groups are trying to block or delay the reopening of the clinic through a rezoning petition and complaints to the city that permits haven't been issued as required for the clinic's indoor remodeling.

"Once they get the permits we'll be off to the next thing—we will try to persuade contractors not to work there," said Cheryl Sullenger of the Wichita chapter of Operation Rescue.

The attempted roadblocks cast in front of the clinic before it even opens are not discouraging leaders of the organization that bought the building, where abortions, family planning and other gynecological care would be offered.

"We will continue to move forward to see that women have their

rights,” said Julie Burkhart, who worked with Tiller’s clinic for eight years on political and legislative issues. “It’s incredibly important because women in this region need access to good medical care.”

Since the clinic closed, women in the Wichita area have had to travel at least 150 miles (241 kms) to Oklahoma City or Kansas City for abortions.

Burkhart directs a nonprofit organization called Trust Women Foundation Inc, which now owns the single-story, nearly windowless clinic building that sits between a busy highway and a neighborhood of single-family homes.

Tiller’s murder spawned formation of the organization with the goal of reopening a clinic, Burkhart said. It took 2 1/2 years to plan a new clinic, look for possible locations and raise money to buy the building, she said. Burkhart is braced for persistent opposition.

“This is absolutely one of the most difficult things I have had to do in my life,” said Burkhart, 46. “I have a lot of brave people working with me.”

Constant Picketing

The clinic was the site of constant picketing. Burkhart’s home has also been picketed and she has been referred to as a killer in anti-abortion brochures, she said.

Mark Gietzen, chairman of Kansas Coalition for Life, said people in his group are “sidewalk counselors, not protesters” and that between 2004 and 2009 they persuaded 396 women not to have abortions at the clinic.

Gietzen is part of a petition drive spearheaded by Kansans for Life that calls upon the Metropolitan Area Planning Commission and Wichita City Council to rezone the property so a clinic can’t be operated there.

Several thousand signatures have been gathered in the online petition drive, said David Gittrich, development director of Kansans for Life. The petitions will be presented next month to show opposition to the clinic and the traffic, parking problems, disturbances and police calls it creates, Gittrich said.

"We can't stop an abortion clinic, but we can stop it from going in there," Gietzen said. No alternate location is being proposed but Gietzen said it should be in a commercial, not residential area.

Burkhart said disruptions outside the clinic arise from the protests.

"I don't see us being a nuisance to the neighborhood, I see us as a benefit," Burkhart said. "They are the ones who are a nuisance."

At a meeting of the city council last month, city attorney Gary Rebenstorf said the council could rezone the property, but under state law the stated reason could not be to stop an abortion clinic.

Several businesses near the clinic provide medical services and to single out the clinic for rezoning would be a misuse of the zoning laws, said Bob Eye, attorney for Trust Women.

Sullenger has sought to delay the project by complaining to the city that no permits were obtained to modify the building. Burkhart said the contractors will get all required permits and that Sullenger is making a "bogus claim."

Tiller's murder is the main reason the proposed new clinic in Wichita is gaining a lot of attention, both sides agree. Gietzen said the killer should be condemned by everyone in the pro-life movement.

"He was an idiot, a loner, and not informed about basic

Christian principles,” Gietzen said. “He was very much like the people who do the school shootings. He was anything but pro-life.”

Editor's Note: *Pro-abortion activists are celebrating the re-opening of a murder mill on the 40th anniversary of Roe v. Wade. What are your thoughts on the pro-life camp losing this battle? How does it affect the big picture?*

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