

Dallas-Area Church Battles to Preserve 150-Year Legacy

An historic Dallas-area church, White Rock Chapel in Addison, founded by freed slaves in 1884, is battling to rebuild on the same property it has occupied for nearly 150 years. However, this endeavor faces resistance from both neighbors and the city council.

Church leader Don Wesson, driven by the mission to resurrect this rich spiritual legacy, expressed his determination, stating, "Our focus, though, is to bring this historic, spiritual and religious legacy back to life."

The church's journey is deeply intertwined with the history of reconciliation, as it was initially established after a plantation owner, who worshiped with the congregation, donated two acres of higher ground in 1918 following repeated floods and a suspected arson in 1960.

Despite the noble intent to restore and preserve this African-American church's heritage, opposition has emerged from neighbors concerned about increased traffic in their neighborhood.

Wesson lamented the missed opportunity for the community, saying, "Formerly enslaved people working with their former enslaver not only to buy land for a church, to build the church and then attend the church together. I mean, for us, that is a huge legacy on which we intend to build. And our disappointment is that the city's action is not allowing us to bring this real benefit and blessing to the community."

Five years ago, Wesson and his wife, Wanda, acquired the property with aspirations to safeguard its historical significance and revitalize it as an active church. However, their pursuit faced hurdles when seeking a building permit for

renovations, prompting pushback from some community members.

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In July, 20% of neighboring households registered written objections to the Wesson's special use permit request. Although it required a supermajority approval from the city council, the permit request narrowly failed.

Notably, the city's Planning and Zoning Commission concluded that the expected traffic impact would be "inconsequential" to the surrounding areas.

The Wessons and their supporters perceive this legal battle as a "real tragedy" that deprives the neighborhood, state and nation of the blessings of the church's history of reconciliation.

Attorney Jeremy Dys of the First Liberty Institute, representing the Wessons, alleges religious discrimination by the city council. The institute has sent a demand letter to the council, asserting violations of state and federal protections by denying the permit.

Dys contends that the concerns raised by neighbors mask an aversion to a "small African-American congregation" in their affluent neighborhood, describing it as a tragic situation.

"This is a very tony neighborhood. It has houses that are, I'm going to guess, somewhere in the neighborhood of 5- 6000 square feet around them. It is a very wealthy neighborhood. And quite frankly, they simply do not want this small African-American congregation to remain across the street from them," Dys says.

"That is tragic and just tragic that just a few neighbors can stand in the way of an historic African-American congregation

for even existing in the neighborhood,” he continues. “That’s wrong at any time for anyone, but to say in 2023 America, ‘not in my backyard,’ I think is even more despicable.”

In 2000, the Texas Historical Commission recognized the church’s location as a historic site worthy of a Texas State Historical Marker. The White Rock Chapel website highlights its legacy of racial reconciliation during tumultuous times in American history, particularly during and after the Civil War.

The town of Addison, when approached for comment, emphasized its long-standing support for White Rock Chapel and its commitment to finding a resolution with the Wessons. While the city council couldn’t secure the supermajority approval required for the zoning request in its current form, it voted to waive the one-year waiting period for refiling, granting the Wessons the opportunity to submit a new request at any time. {eoa}

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