

SMU agrees to house Bush library, policy institute; opponents vow to fight: Ground breaking expected next year

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Southern Methodist University trustees have officially agreed to house the George W. Bush presidential library, museum and public policy institute on its Dallas campus, despite objections from many United Methodists and alumni.

The board at the United Methodist-related university voted unanimously February 22 to approve an agreement with the Bush Presidential Library Foundation.

Bush wrote in a letter to SMU president R. Gerald Turner: "I look forward to the day when both the general public and scholars come and explore the important and challenging issues our nation has faced during my presidency – from economic and homeland security to fighting terrorism and promoting freedom and democracy."

Bush and his wife, Laura Bush, an SMU graduate, are United Methodists. During his two terms in office, however, Bush has tended to rely on conservative evangelical clergy and churches, mostly non-Methodists, for support and advice.

"The fight is not over," said Andrew Weaver, a Methodist pastor and SMU alumnus who is leading an online petition drive that has attracted more than 11,000 signatures against the plan. Opponents argue that the war in Iraq and many other Bush administration policies are contrary to Methodist teachings.

The planned presidential library and museum would be administered and run by the National Archives and Records Administration—as are a dozen other presidential libraries. Many Methodists objected especially to the inclusion of a public policy institute in the complex.

Schubert M. Ogden, SMU professor emeritus, told United Methodist News Service that establishing a “partisan think tank will unquestionably damage the integrity and the reputation of SMU.” SMU has an enrollment of about 11,000 students.

Weaver and some church leaders said they hope to challenge the 99-year lease approved by executives at the church’s eight-state South Central Jurisdiction conference that will meet July 16-19 in Dallas. The jurisdiction’s mission council voted 10-4, with one abstention, in a closed executive session one year ago to make available 36 acres on the southeast side of the SMU campus.

Weaver maintained that only the full jurisdictional conference can give final approval, and that the executive decision by the council would not stand either in church law or in civil law.

But Bishop Scott Jones, president of the jurisdiction’s college of bishops, said the mission council “has the authority to enter this agreement.” The mission council will report its actions at the July meeting, “and I’m sure there will be conversation at that time,” Jones told United Methodist News Service.

Foundation officials said they hope to break ground next year and finish construction within five years. Estimated costs range as high as \$500 million. Fund-raising will be done by the foundation in conjunction with the university.