

New Jersey church prepares for court fight against town's attempted 'land grab'

by [Mary Frances Schjonberg](#)

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Christ Episcopal Church in Toms River, New Jersey (Courtesy photo)

[Christ Episcopal Church](#) in Toms River, New Jersey, backed by the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey and Episcopal Church officials, is preparing to fight the township's effort to acquire its 11-acre property.

"We will do all that we can to ensure that your ministries in this place continue for a long, long time, and that it is the leadership of Christ Church, not the mayor or the township council, who decides how this church property is used," New Jersey Bishop Sally French told Christ Church members in a May 4 letter to the congregation.

The move by the town council and the mayor to buy the land or seize it through [eminent domain](#) comes at the same time that the church has an application pending approval for a 17-bed overnight homeless shelter on its property. Mayor Daniel Rodrick, who is behind the land-seizure effort, opposes the shelter, as do some of the church's neighbors.

Joan Petit Mason, a diocesan staff member and a former Christ Church rector, read the bishop's letter promising support at the end of the May 4 Eucharist.

Lisa Hoffman, Christ Church's rector, who is out of town, reiterated the bishop's stance. "The church and the diocese are prepared for a long court fight to protect our congregation and property from this egregious land grab," she told the congregation in another letter.

In a statement released to news reporters, French reaffirmed her support for the church. "Jesus tells us to care for the poor and vulnerable as we would care for him, and the people of Christ Church are putting that commandment into action," French said.

The church and the diocese say the property is not for sale, yet the elected town council on April 30, during a raucous and contentious meeting, [agreed to begin the process](#) of buying or seizing the church and five other properties to create two new town parks.

"As a Christian leader and a resident of New Jersey, I am troubled by the township's move to block the faithful ministry of Christ Church, and I am saddened that the mayor and township council are prioritizing pickleball courts over responding to hunger and homelessness," French said. "I ask that Toms River lift the burden these proceedings have placed on our parish and diocese, and I pray that we can move forward in serving our neighbors."

The church faces two different issues with the town. Its overnight shelter plan needs the Zoning Board of Adjustment to approve a classification variance. That vote is due on May 22. Six days later, on May 28, the town council is scheduled to take public comment and make a final decision on the land-seizure ordinance. French said she will attend the latter meeting to speak on behalf of Christ Church and the diocese. She encouraged Episcopalians in a May 3 [statement](#) to the diocese also to attend as a show of support.

The church had less than 24 hours' notice that the council would hear the first reading of a resolution to buy or seize the six parcels of land. The notice did not come from the town but rather from a Toms River resident who told a Christ Church member. The member alerted Hoffman.

She acknowledged in her May 4 letter that "there are a variety of emotions" running through the congregation. "I would expect that many of you are feeling angry, afraid, uncertain and powerless," she said. Some members want to take some action, she said. However, Hoffman asked them to "hold steady" until after those meetings so that the church will know where it stands.

"This could be a long fight, and there will be plenty of time for community organizing and acts of protest," Hoffman said.

Rodrick, the mayor, has been critical of the presence of people experiencing homelessness in Toms River, [accusing Ocean County](#) of exaggerating the homeless issue and "dumping" people without housing into the township. County commissioners [deny](#) the accusation. On April 16, they said Rodrick is "actively creating a public emergency" by refusing to collaborate with them to help people experiencing homelessness and by shutting down the town's winter warming center.

He has also criticized rock star Jon Bon Jovi's pop-up [JBJ Soul Kitchen](#) at the downtown library, claiming it attracts people who are homeless.

The commissioners said in their letter that Rodrick's "inflammatory finger-pointing does nothing to help those who are suffering and, worse, it threatens the safety and dignity of our residents." —Episcopal News Service