

June 16, 2025



[Christ Church](#) and the [Affordable Housing Alliance](#) need an exception to the church's zoning classification to open the shelter. The town's administrative [code says](#) that zoning board members must consider whether the request "can be granted without

substantial detriment to the public good and will not substantially impair the intent and purpose of the zone plan and zoning ordinances.”

New Jersey Bishop Sally French said that she was also disappointed.

“I do appreciate that all members of the zoning board recognized the need for such a shelter, and I hope and pray that there is a way forward that will permit the church to continue their gospel ministries of care for the poor, the homeless, and the vulnerable,” she said. The diocese and the parish “remain committed to this work and to continuing to serve those in need,” French added.

As board members cast their votes, they gave their reasoning. Nels Luthman would have approved the variance, noting that the town’s zoning structure does not allow for such a shelter anywhere.

“Wherever we would put it in this town, we would need a use variance,” he said, adding that he knows the Christ Church shelter would not help every person experiencing homelessness, “but it’s a step in the right direction.”

Board member Dana Tormollan disagreed. “We’re not solving the problem; we’re putting a small Band-Aid on it,” she said before voting no.

Jason Crispin, the board chair, acknowledged that Toms River has a “homelessness problem,” but he said the Christ Church site “is not adequate.” Crispin said he was also worried about how the shelter would be staffed and secured. Approving this variance, he said, could lead to a flurry of requests for non-residential uses in neighborhoods.

A video of the meeting is [here](#).

The shelter proposal calls for updating the church’s circa-1882 parish house while adding 949 square feet. The Affordable Housing Alliance and the [Toms River Housing and Homeless Coalition](#) have operated out of the building since 2023. The AHA would run the shelter with a grant from Ocean County.

Some Toms River residents have [said](#) that a shelter on church property would make the town a “magnet” for people experiencing homelessness. Others said it would put neighborhood homes and the children who live in them at risk. An expert witness at an earlier board meeting predicted a 15 percent decline in the value of homes near the shelter.

The zoning board's rejection comes in advance of an anticipated July 30 vote by the town council on Mayor Daniel Rodrick's desire to [acquire the church's property](#) and five other lots, either through purchase or use of eminent domain. The mayor said previously that it is a "coincidence" that his land-seizure plan became public during the town's zoning board's deliberations. "One thing has nothing to do with the other," he [said](#).

Rodrick wants to create a park on the church's 11 acres. He has not said what will happen to the ashes of 325 people interred in a memorial garden on the property.

It is not clear how area residents would feel about a large park in their neighborhood, but Rodrick said in an interview that, if he had to put the proposal to a vote, 85 percent of voters would approve it.

The mayor's plan became a [topic](#) in the local June 10 primary election, as did Rodrick's actions to reduce the size of the police force, close an animal shelter, and close a local emergency medical service after accusing it of "financial irregularities."

Rodrick [claimed](#) during the May 28 town council meeting that his four candidates would win by 65 percent and his opponents would face "massive loss." Instead, two lost to challengers who oppose Rodrick's plan. One Rodrick candidate defeated an incumbent who supports the church while the other incumbent, who opposes the effort, won a spot on the November general election ballot.

The primary results mean that no matter how the November election turns out, the mayor will no longer have a majority when the new council convenes in January.

Christ Church held a prayer vigil the evening before the primary. "In these times when we find ourselves being challenged, what the people of God do is we pray and we vote," Hoffman said

French attended the vigil. "This isn't partisan politics, this is about supporting those who are vulnerable and in need, and supporting our church, this particular church, and all faith communities," she said.

French said the diocese and the parish "remain committed to this location," adding that they will defend the church's "right to stay on this piece of property where we have been for so many years, and we will do that through whatever means are available to us." —Episcopal News Service