

New Jersey mayor says town won't seize Episcopal church if public doesn't support plan

by [Mary Frances Schjonberg](#)

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Christ Episcopal Church in Toms River, New Jersey (Mary Frances Schjonberg/Episcopal News Service)

Mayor Dan Rodrick of Toms River, New Jersey, has delayed a council vote on his [plan](#) to seize an Episcopal church's property and said he would end his effort to turn the church's 11 acres into parkland if town officials confirm the public doesn't support it.

The proposed ordinance that would allow the town to seize Christ Episcopal Church had been heading for a final vote July 30. Instead, the delay was welcomed by Episcopal leaders, who expressed relief while reaffirming that the church is not for sale.

The mayor made his latest move a day after a group of residents in the Jersey Shore town of 100,000 [launched a petition drive](#) to rescind the proposed land seizure ordinance, which was first approved on April 30. Such ordinances require a second vote before taking effect.

“I have always been of the belief that elected officials should represent their constituents,” Rodrick said in an interview. “So, we are conducting a public opinion poll, and once we have a better understanding of how the public feels about acquiring the property we will make a determination as to whether or not we are moving forward.”

The petition drive will continue, according to Philip Brilliant, one of the organizers. A [separate effort to recall Rodrick](#) began July 25.

The proposed ordinance would allow the town to acquire the 11-acre Christ Church site and five other properties not adjacent to the church either through voluntary sale or seizure by eminent domain. Rodrick had said he envisioned turning the property into pickleball courts, a soccer field, a children’s playground and a skate park—a plan that first materialized publicly in April after Christ Church and its partner organizations had proposed building a homeless shelter on part of the property.

The shelter proposal had been opposed by Rodrick and some of the church’s neighbors, and in June, the town’s [zoning board voted against](#) the church’s request for a variance.

“I am relieved to learn that Mayor Rodrick has removed the [eminent domain] ordinance from the July 30 agenda as he seeks the wisdom of the people he serves in Toms River,” said Sally French, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey. “Attempts to take a house of worship by eminent domain would be a great injustice to the community Christ Church has served for 160 years. It would also infringe on our religious freedom.”

Lisa Hoffman, Christ Church's rector, echoed those sentiments. "The leadership of Christ Church has been clear since the April 30 council meeting that the church and property at 415 Washington St. are not for sale," she said. "We continue to stand by this and believe that we have wide community support against the actions introduced by the mayor and council."

Hoffman added that she hopes the township "will respect our right to worship in our church home and continue our mission and ministry to the Toms River community by rescinding the eminent domain ordinance prior to its second reading."

If the church and diocese are not "willing sellers," Rodrick said, he now wants to gauge public support for his plan through a "statistically significant" poll of some 300-500 respondents, financed with his campaign funds.

If the poll indicates support, "then maybe we'll move forward," he said. "If the public does not support it, then I won't. And I won't do that just based on a meeting where people come down to lobby the council, because inevitably you're really just seeing one side."

Rodrick did not make clear whether that polling has already begun or how the results would be made known. "I'm not going to give you the details on it," he said.

Opposition to the eminent domain plan has been vocal and, in some cases, organized. Many people who spoke at the April, May, and June council meetings vehemently objected. Christ Church and the diocese also mounted a campaign to oppose Rodrick's efforts. Members attended the council meetings wearing Christ Church T-shirts and carrying signs. Others stood along the Washington Street side of the church property on a regular basis waving signs that read "Save Christ Church" and "People Over Pickleball."

The church also drew support from an interfaith group of clergy and lay people and from the wider public. A Change.org [petition supporting the church](#) has been signed by 9,303 people. A [GoFundMe page](#) has raised nearly \$26,300 to help with the church's legal costs. The parish has pledged that any money remaining would go toward Christ Church's outreach ministries.

Meanwhile, Rodrick acknowledged that, while he had talked in the past about creating downtown parks, he hadn't initiated a formal planning process until April to acquire the Christ Church site and five other properties.

He also indicated that he had been unaware until May that the ashes of 325 people were interred at Christ Church's memorial garden. "The township would not be interested in disturbing any sort of burial ground or memorial garden," he said at the time. —Episcopal News Service