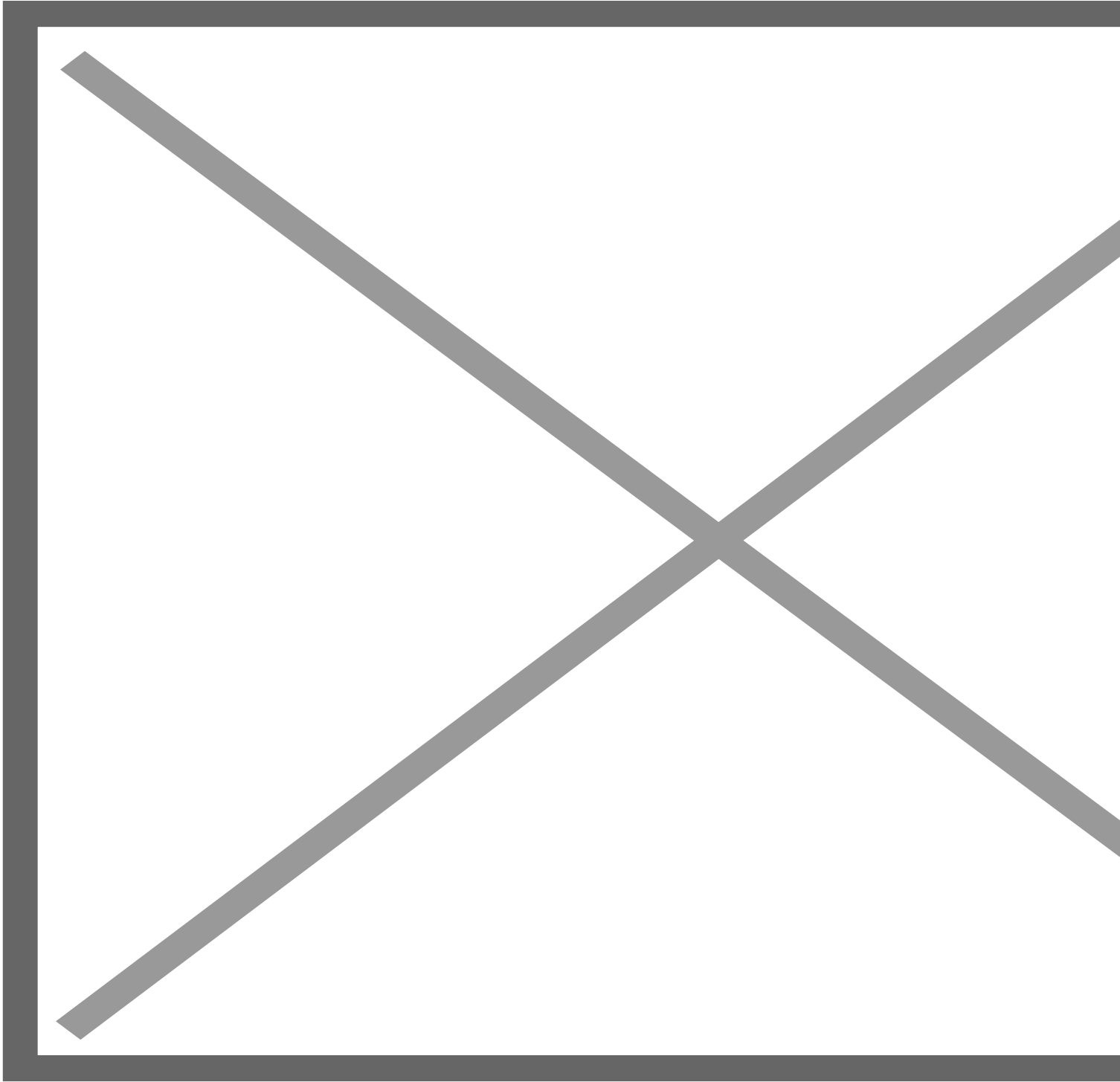


New Jersey mayor abandons effort to seize Episcopal church's property to build park

by [Mary Frances Schjonberg](#)

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Christ Episcopal Church's memorial garden (Photo: Mary Frances Schjonberg/Episcopal News Service)

Toms River Mayor Daniel Rodrick on August 27 unexpectedly dropped his plan to seize Christ Episcopal Church's land for a public park.

His announcement came during the New Jersey town's council meeting's public comment time when a speaker asked him to stop the seizure. He responded that a poll he commissioned showed that "it's pretty clear that the public does not support the eminent domain. We thought the church would be a willing seller and we're not moving forward with the eminent domain of the church."

He said the poll, which he noted had an error rate of plus or minus five, showed that "somewhere in the neighborhood" 60 percent of the town opposed his plan. (Rodrick had told Episcopal News Service in May that, if the plan had to be put to a vote, he expected 85 percent of township voters would support it.)

Following the mayor's reversal, the council entered an executive session to seek legal advice on whether it could decide to let the proposed ordinance die, as action on it had not been advertised as legally required. Despite some conflicting opinions from township attorneys, council members unanimously passed a resolution saying they would no longer try to acquire Christ Church's property by eminent domain.

The resolution apparently leaves open the possibility that a new resolution could be brought on the other five lots Rodrick also wants to take for parkland along the Toms River. Those lots are not adjacent to the church.

Lisa Hoffman, Christ Church's rector, said in an interview that Rodrick promised her after the meeting that the church would receive a copy of the resolution bearing the town seal to assure the congregation that his effort is over. Hoffman said she is "extremely grateful and relieved" that Rodrick and the council have dropped any plans to seize the church's property.

"While we will never know for certain what prompted the initial action to take the church, it is now time for the healing process to begin and for Christ Church to get back to the work of the Gospel without the continued threat hanging over our heads," she said.

That healing process began just after the council meeting when Hoffman, senior warden Denis Henry and another Christ Church member invited the mayor to worship with them on any Sunday he chooses. Hoffman said she assured Rodrick that he would be welcome.

Diocese of New Jersey Bishop Sally French said she is glad to know that Toms River residents spoke up in support of Christ Church and the town council acted as it did.

"It's been a long and difficult journey, and I remain grateful for the clergy and people of Christ Church and their commitment to serve those in need," she said. "We have not forgotten the poor and homeless residents of Toms River, and I am glad that Christ Church will continue to be able to serve them as part of our Christian commitment to love and care for our neighbors."

Christ Church had faced Rodrick's threat to acquire the church's [11 acres](#) and five other lots for parkland, either through purchase or by eminent domain, for the last four months. The town council on April 30 approved the first reading of the required property-seizure ordinance. He had postponed the necessary public hearing and second vote for the next four monthly council meetings, including the August 27 meeting.

Christ Church members began to protest Rodrick's plan as soon as they discovered the ordinance on the April agenda. They and others spoke during the public comment period of that meeting and the next four sessions. They told how Christ Church helped them through hard times and how much the church's outreach ministries

meant to the town.

Supporters regularly stood along the busy street outside the church waving signs that read “People Over Pickleball,” “Save Christ Church,” and other sayings. The church also held two interfaith prayer services, which showed, in part, the deep support the church had among area faith communities.

Many Toms River residents and supporters nationwide rallied to join Christ Church’s opposition to Rodrick’s effort. More than 9,500 people signed a Change.org [petition](#) opposing the mayor’s plans. A [GoFundMe](#) effort raised \$25,535 to help with legal expenses to fight the eminent domain threat. The church has said that any leftover money would go towards its many outreach ministries.

Hoffman said prayers, encouragement, and support from clergy, congregations, community groups, and individuals “sustained and strengthened us throughout.”

The abrupt ending to the eminent domain plan came nearly two weeks after the church decided not to fight the town’s [refusal](#) to grant it a zoning variance to open a 17-bed overnight shelter on its campus. Hoffman said at the time that Rodrick’s threats figured into the parish’s decision. —Episcopal News Service