



FIRST UNITARIAN SOCIETY of WESTCHESTER

A member of the Unitarian Universalist Association

P.O. Box 26

Hastings-on-Hudson, NY 10706-3227

914-478-2710 • fusw.org

Minutes of the Congregational Meeting of Sunday, January 8, 2024

This Zoom meeting was called to inform the Congregation of fast-moving progress on our problem of finding a new home to rent. The meeting was not a corporate meeting where official business could be conducted. It began after Sunday services at 11:10 with Arlin's wish for us to come together with consideration for each other's ideas and opinions. There were 35 Zoom participants. Some of those participants were couples but no official count was taken; almost every active member of FUSW was present on the Zoom call.

In accordance with the agenda developed the day before, Denise briefly reviewed recent doings – the lease, the architect's involvement, the Board meeting the day before – and said that we were moving quickly but judiciously.

Next, Lenore described the work of the very active New Home Committee in recent months. Obstacles they encountered included zoning or parking or accessibility problems, landlords who don't want churches as tenants, and occupancy problems. They used online resources to hunt for rental opportunities, considering vacant banks, houses, and other standalone buildings. They contacted brokers and property managers, making well over 100 calls, and about 30 properties were visited by a committee member, finding three serious possibilities for us, two of which were ruled out because assembly would not be permitted. This left 955 Yonkers Avenue in Yonkers.

Lisa then described the property, a large brick building that is partly two and partly three stories high. The property has a parking lot with ample parking. It is named Intercounty Medical Plaza. The main entrance faces the parking lot and inside it is inviting, with marble floors and good lighting.

The people working for the landlord are friendly. The space we are offered is in the central part of the basement served by an elevator whose door opens onto a wall of glass blocks that will remain. There are about 3,000 square feet of space, at the best price per square foot of the three possibilities that were considered. The space has sprinklers and more than one stairway. There will be accessible bathrooms. Congregants who visited had a good impression. The property is in a good neighborhood, with a church and diners nearby on Yonkers Avenue and a residential community beyond the fence that separates the commercial area. Another potential tenant wants the space, but the landlord wants us. When Lisa finished, Diane added that her initial thoughts were negative because of the word "basement." However, there is no hint of dampness or bad odor; the space is pleasant and sheltered, with good lighting and no noise from Yonkers Avenue.

Susan then spoke about the financial aspects of such a move, starting by mentioning the fact that we are at present investing in the future of FUSW because our budget at South Church this year has \$158,000 of expenses against \$127,000 of operating income. This means we need \$31,000 from our reserves to pay the bills. Our assets, especially from the sale of 25 OJA, allow us to spend money as an investment in our future growth. There will be one-time costs for our lawyer, architect, moving costs, and new furnishings, but the demolition of walls and ceilings currently in the space and the buildout of rooms as specified by us and our architect have no cost to us unless we want something special (like a kitchen). The initial rent will be \$4,500 per month, and Susan estimates that our new annual budget would then require \$64,000 from our reserves. This is an appropriate use of our money from 25 OJA, according to NY state law. When Susan finished, Paul added that \$4,500 per month for this space comes out to \$18 per square foot per year, a great buy for commercial space.

Then came Q&A.

Bill: What is the term of the lease? **A:** either five or ten years, renewable for the same amount of time, with annual rent increases of 2% or maybe 3%.

Marilee: The buildout seems vague. A: it depends upon what we want.

Eric: When will we sign and when will we start paying rent? A: We will have to sign soon, and give a deposit, but rent does not begin until the space is ready for us to move in, including change of use and C of O.

Jane: What about a kitchen? Answer from Lisa: The cost will be on us. There is no budget for that yet. Also, can there be provision of Bluetooth technology for the hard of hearing? Paul said yes, there will be a good sound system there.

Sara: Kitchen? A: We don't want full food preparation; an electric stove is OK.

Marilee: When does rent begin? A: When we can move in.

Rosanna: Will we build green space? A: Rob P will try to get the landlord to put solar panels on the roof.

Sarita: Be careful about the stove – get it in writing.

Bill: Can we sublet as we did to raise money at OJA? A: Lisa said that as renters, we can't sublet. Susan said we don't rent, we receive "donations for use of space" from nonprofits, as we did before. The lease must have wording that permits this.

Rita: Will there be air conditioning? What about transportation? A: Yes. And buses run on Yonkers Avenue.

Ron: What about the height of the ceilings? When could we move in? A: Lisa said that as they are now, there is no sense of being cramped in, and the new ceiling will be higher. Moving in could happen this spring.

Betsy: What about our lease with South Church? And this looks like a good opportunity for FUSW diversity. A: We can leave South Church with no penalty 60 days after giving notice.

At this point, about noon, Sara (with Matthew's assistance) showed us the excellent photos she took when she visited 955. Then,

Theresa: Could there be basement issues, like leaks from plumbing, etc.? Susan replied that there is no flooding in the area, and she will ask our architect about other possible problems within the building.

Adelaide: The owners of 955 bought the property for \$5.5 million in 2022 and have already spent \$750,000 on improvements. This speaks well of them.

Larry: Can we exit the lease? And he prefers a 5-year lease with renewal. Denise replied that yes, there will be some possibility for getting out of the lease, perhaps a “good guy guarantee”.

Richard: Rev. Bryce wished FUSW were back in Yonkers, but does the location matter? Arlin replied that some members may leave us because of location, but we will still have Zoom.

Ron: What is the traffic like on Sunday? Who else will be in the building then? What hours will we have access? A: Traffic will be light; nobody else would be in the building on Sunday; the lease originally said that we would have access from 7AM to 9PM, but that is not enough - perhaps 24/7 access.

John: If the elevators are out of service, the first floor would be inaccessible from the basement. Would that eliminate the possibility of change of use/assembly? A: The architect said that the sprinklers and stairs were enough. Maybe there will have to be an emergency phone at the elevator.

Bill: A ten-year lease is too long, but five years renewable is OK.

Rosanna: What about WIFI in the space? A: Diane said it is fine.

Marilee: Are the bathrooms our own, or shared with other tenants? A: One of our own, plus two in the hallway.

Rita: Are there other tenants in the basement, and she asked for clarification of drawings that were sent. A: Yes, there could be other tenants in the basement; the sketches were clarified.

Doris: The space is excellent, and many thanks for all the work that has gone into this search.

Brenda: Will I be able to get there? A: We hope so.

Then Paul described the next steps that are needed. The lease must be completed with our attorney’s help. Denise needs to sign it. Change of use of the property must be accomplished and our architect must be engaged (and a committee appointed to advise him) to establish the

desired buildout of the space. This is not a done deal, but there is lots of excitement about it.

Then Ron asked if we could put up an FUSW sign. The answer is yes, on the wall facing the parking lot.

Paul reminded us that a straw poll was wanted to find out how much support there is for a move to 955. The vast majority voted yes to such a move. There were not any no votes, and no abstentions. However, no official count was taken of members present or those voting yes, so it can't be assumed that the vote was unanimous – some members may have left before the vote or simply not voted. However, a vast majority of members of FUSW mandated renting at 955.

At 12:45, Arlin closed our meeting with praise and honor for all the work that has gone into this effort.

Respectfully submitted by John Scheuneman on 1/9/24