

# Church congregation to vote on development proposal

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By Tim Foran  
CANADIAN CHAMPION STAFF

For almost 120 years, the historic red brick sanctuary of St. Paul's United Church on Main and James streets has stood as a western gateway into Milton's downtown.

Together with its nearby Main Street neighbours Knox Presbyterian Church — built at the same time in 1890 — and the limestone Grace Anglican Church — constructed five years later — St. Paul's serves as a visible reminder of the town's Christian heritage, one also preserved by Milton's town council, which still reads the Lord's Prayer before its monthly sessions.

However, facing millions of dollars in costs to reconfigure the aging facility, the church's council and board of trustees is asking the congregation of St. Paul's to vote next month on whether to pursue a development proposal that would see the sanctuary dismantled and a new church and 80-unit seniors residence constructed in its place.

The new facility would incorporate some heritage elements of the existing church, perhaps including the south wall facing Main Street and the east wall facing James Street, marked by the large rose window, but they may have to be moved to a different location, according to the church's website.

"It's pretty hard, when you've been going there since you're three years old, to see it be destroyed," said 80-year-old Wilma Tyrer, who has taught Sunday school at St. Paul's for almost 60 years. "I would like to see it saved."

The council of St. Paul's has recommended partnering with a local developer following advice given by vision, transition, fundraising and development task forces.

"The congregation has articulated their desire to worship in a multi-functional facility, which would allow us to fulfill our mission and to free us from the burden of building issues that have consumed our energies," states a letter to the congregation from Rev. John Benham, chair of trustees, and Kathy Sellers, chair of the church council.

Structural issues with the church came to light several years ago when engineers discovered the roof was unstable. The church responded by installing eight stainless steel posts inside the sanctuary to hold it up. The south wall is also leaning and there are problems with the foundations, said Tyrer.

An assessment report prepared in March 2007 estimates the cost to bring the sanctuary and the attached Christian Education Centre up to standards is \$1.85 million. However, the church's long-range planning committee has already determined the current facility is ill-suited to its mission and ministry needs. The committee has also estimated the cost of reconfiguring the facility at \$5.8 million, far higher than the \$1.25 million the church's fundraising task force believes it can raise. And the congregation voted last year to reject building a church in a new location.

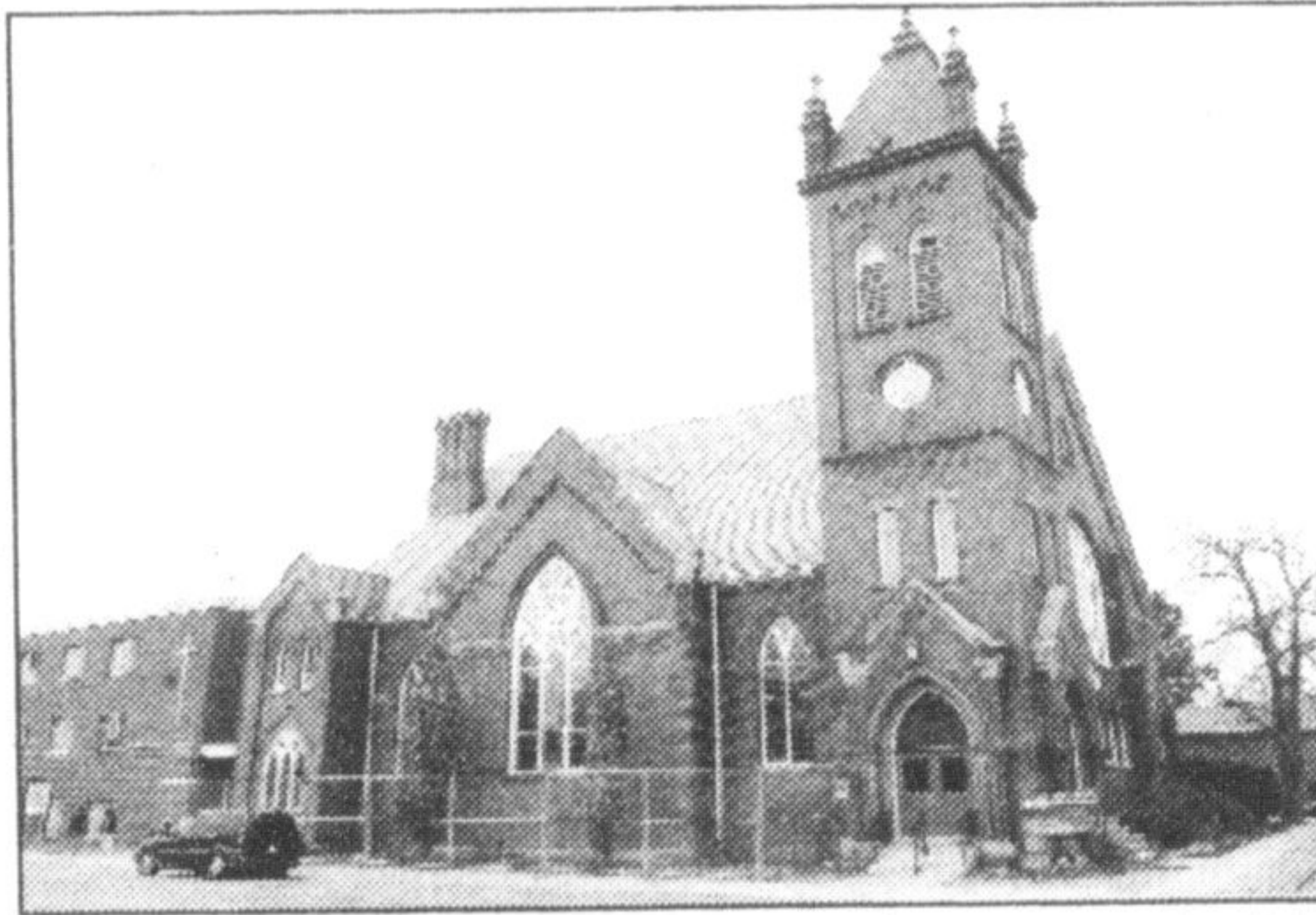
"Thus, the concept of partnering with a developer to get worship and other necessary space on the present site is the most viable remaining option," states a January 22 letter from church officials.

The church isn't a designated heritage property, though it has been inventoried. According to the Town, the inventory is used as a tool to identify heritage resources that would be examined if a development proposal for the property were submitted. Provincial policy requires significant heritage resources to be preserved.

Ironically, the St. Paul's website notes, while such heritage concerns are common today, they weren't considered when the church demolished its original chapel, dating from 1852, to build the current Christian Education Centre attached to the west side of the sanctuary in 1962.

Under the current proposal, that centre would also be dismantled, along with the sanctuary, to make way for an 80-unit life-lease retirement residence and 12,000 square feet of church space.

The benefit to St. Paul's is that it would retain ownership of the land and the new building, and would receive about 5 per cent of the revenue each time one of the units was



The congregation of St. Paul's must decide whether to pursue a development proposal for the aging church.

sold, according to a February 27 letter to the congregation. It estimates it would only have to invest \$1.3 million into the new facility.

The congregation will vote on the proposal Sunday, Apr. 19. If approved, there would be a 90-day period to examine the project's feasibility. If both the church and the developer decided to pursue the project, a development agreement would then be negotiated and plans for the project would be prepared and submitted to the Town.

Currently, most of the church property is considered a core commercial sub-area in Milton's Official Plan, with a height limit in that area of four storeys.

Situations such as what St. Paul's is facing aren't uncommon. Many operators of historic buildings find it difficult to finance site reconfiguration, but face opposition from the outside public to demolition of the structure.

"It's an emotional thing," commented Mayor Gord Krantz. "Something that's been

there forever, there's a sentimental attachment. I certainly understand that."

Krantz recalled some opposition to the demolition of the original Bruce Street Public School, whose two-foot limestone walls were pulled down in 1972 to make way for the current Milton Public Library.

The problem comes down to money, he said. If the operators of a historic building don't have the money to repair or retrofit the facility, then there's a need for public funds that might carry conditions on how the facility is used. "If you're going to spend a lot of public money on it, would it still remain just a church? It becomes a different story."

The situation isn't unique to Milton. St. Paul's United Church in Brampton, built around the same time and in the same architectural style — marked by a bell tower, concentric pews, and good acoustics to hear the preacher — has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars this decade to restore the downtown landmark. But a much bigger rehabilitation of the roof will be necessary in 15 to 20 years, noted Rev. Kent Ward.

Tyrer said she's resigned to the fact the congregation will vote to examine redevelopment, as it doesn't have the money to finance site reconfiguration. But she's especially worried about what would happen to the eight stained-glass windows that are memorials to members of St. Paul's. For now, she's hoping for a miracle.

"There's a big prayer line on that, that's for sure."

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