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August 2005

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So much for “tax-free” churches

...upon this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. --Matt 16:18

Dear Friends:

We are aware of perhaps a dozen churches that have purchased or are searching for large tracts of land to accommodate their growing congregations. Several have discovered that local officials can truly be public servants—or one’s worst nightmare. A church we want to tell you about experienced the latter.

Several years ago, *Editors of Religion Today* wrote about Skyline Wesleyan Church in Rancho San Diego, California. Skyline’s search for property for a new campus began in 1981. Seven years later, the church purchased a 130-acre mountain on a major freeway. Unfortunately, development rights for the top of the mountain were subsequently denied when nearby residents complained the church would block their view. After several years, a campus redesign for the side of the mountain, and a new pastor, the church had spent \$7 million and “not one stone had been turned.” *Religion Today*¹ continues the story:

An endangered bird known as the California Black Tailed Gnat Catcher was the next obstacle. The church was allowed to build on only 25 acres, because the remaining 105 were reserved permanently for a pair of Gnat Catchers. ‘The church doesn’t know whether the birds actually found their 105 acres,’ [said Pastor Jim Garlow]. The church also was informed that heavy construction could not take place on the mountain during the Gnat Catcher breeding season, which lasts six months, [from February to August].

A small bush called the coastal sage also presented a problem. Developers were forbidden from building wherever the bush grows, or may someday grow, Garlow said. Then the church was required to pay \$120,000 for a two-acre architectural dig that uncovered a pottery shard and a rock believed to be blackened by a cooking fire started by Indians. The church paid \$10,000 to cover the area with a special mat and a soil cap, losing 17 parking spaces.

Biologists discovered another endangered bird, the Bell’s Least Vireo, on seven acres the church had hoped to sell. County officials voted to make the seven acres ‘open space,’ meaning the church never will be able to sell or develop it.

Governmental officials citing ‘light pollution’ required the parking lot lights to be lowered from the normal 20 feet to 3 feet...Officials eventually relented, allowing the lights to be 12 feet high as long as they were turned off at certain hours. Other restrictions emerged, including: no school allowed, no senior adult housing permitted, no public service could begin between 5 and 7 p.m. on a weekday.

Soon after Garlow became pastor in 1995, the church bought 8 acres adjacent to the property in order to add 500 parking spaces to its planned 1,500 spaces. But the \$250,000 property was designated as providing ‘environmental connectivity’ and could not be developed.

Finally a permit to build was issued in 1996. The church paid \$38,000 for a study of how

to level out the mountain, but when bulldozers began digging in 1998 they encountered a vein of blue granite, six times harder than concrete. It required blasting with dynamite on 10 different occasions, and the earth-moving contractor, who had been paid \$1.1 million, demanded an additional \$1 million.

Problems got worse. When the Gnat Catcher mating season ended, trucks with heavy earth-moving equipment arrived at the east end of the property. But government officials refused to allow them to unload because of an underground water line. The trucks moved to the west end of the property, but California Department of Transportation officials would not let the earth-movers be unloaded there, either.

[Next] ...The local water district required the church to bring a second water line across the property, and to burrow under the freeway to make the lines available to the next user. Workers encountered more blue granite there...jack hammers increased costs by \$192,000.

Then the California Department of Transportation determined that the freeway in front of the property needed to be widened by two lanes, and that the church had to pay \$1 million of the cost. At the same time, the earthquake law was changed requiring \$856,000 more steel and concrete in the four-story building. The local fire chief needed a new truck, and informed the church that he would not sign permits unless... [Add another \$60,000].

In the week before the grand opening, 16 fiber optic lines were discovered while grading to construct the required freeway lanes. Pacific Bell Phone Company officials demanded \$750,000 to move the phone lines, Garlow said. [Also]...Two underground storm drain pipes did not meet perfectly—they were at the wrong elevation and different sizes—but officials agreed to let the church fix that situation later. One day before the opening, fire officials finally allowed furniture to be brought in.

But delivery trucks could not be used because of wet concrete and asphalt, so 400 volunteers from the church carried thousands of pounds of furniture and equipment to get ready for Saturday night. The paving company began to spread asphalt for the turn-in lane to the church 24 hours before the first service. The Department of Transportation informed the church that 15 under-pavement sensors would have to be installed, programmed, and tested within 24 hours or officials would barricade the property. All of that was accomplished...less than six hours before the first service...

Pastor Garlow reports that from start to finish, it took 19 years and nearly \$26 million to move into Skyline's beautiful new facilities. Even so, there are no regrets. Hundreds of people have come to Christ at the new campus and the church is experiencing rapid growth.

Hopefully, churches planning to expand in our region will not encounter such local opposition. But it is foolish to leave to chance. One way to deal with public officials who are potentially hostile to the Gospel is to UNELECT them in the Primary next month on September 20. In their place, heavenly-minded voters can install "Josephs" who will clear the way.

If we neglect so great an opportunity, to whom should we complain?

Sincerely,

Rick Forcier
Executive Director

PS. Church leaders: Want to meet the "Josephs" who need your help to get elected? Call us.

¹ 19 years and \$23 million later, a church opens. *Religion Today*, Dec 18, 2000, crosswalk.com/advent, printed and edited by permission