



**THE NEW YORK
LANDMARKS
CONSERVANCY**

*50 YEARS OF PRESERVING
THE CITY WE LOVE*

October 31, 2023

**STATEMENT OF THE NEW YORK LANDMARKS CONSERVANCY BEFORE THE NEW YORK CITY
LANDMARKS PRESERVATION COMMISSION REGARDING PROPOSED DEMOLITION OF 165-167 WEST
86th STREET, aka 541 AMSTERDAM AVENUE – WEST PARK PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ON THE BASIS
OF HARDSHIP**

The New York Landmarks Conservancy continues to oppose the application to demolish West Park Presbyterian Church, an individual landmark. We have reviewed the most recent reports and they have affirmed our position that the hardship application falls short.

The Conservancy has a long history with this building. Our staff has made numerous attempts to support its preservation. These include referrals, reports, repair grants, and countless hours of pro bono assistance.

Based on that experience, our previous testimony questioned the applicant's proposed scope of work and budget for exterior restoration. We were pleased to see the Commission's own engineering consultant ask similar questions, and present a much lower budget, which could be phased over time, to allow for a long-term fundraising campaign.

However, we were dismayed to see the applicant's September 5 submission, where a representative of the congregation claimed that the Church did not pursue listing on the National Register of Historic Places because "While preservation grants may have provided funding for small restoration projects, they would not have been nearly enough to address all of the Building's needs." The Conservancy drafted a National Register nomination, and only needed owner consent to complete it. We believe that with listing, West Park would have been a competitive candidate for a State preservation grant. These grants are generally in the \$500,000 range, and can serve as the lynchpin of a successful, long-term fundraising campaign.

Our experience with the restoration and activation of historic religious properties, indeed with many types of historic buildings, shows that they don't follow one set path. Each situation is different and each building presents its own set of issues, but a key ingredient of success has always been an owner who wants to be a good steward of their property, and who is willing to undertake that long-term campaign. Unfortunately, this magnificent church has not had such an owner in its recent past.

The applicants have provided examples showing that redevelopment is not feasible, but these are only three possibilities. The building is being used as a religious property and an arts center, and could continue to do so. An owner committed to preservation has a road map for how to proceed. If the church is demolished, all possibilities are extinguished.

Once again, we would like to note that the Landmarks Law defines hardship as a situation where designation prevents a property owner from realizing a reasonable return on a building or a situation in which an owner can no longer use the building for their purposes. A property not achieving its highest and best use is not hardship. Not being able to do a pristine restoration project all at once is not hardship. Consciously allowing a building to deteriorate is not hardship; it is demolition by neglect. West Park's current state is the result of mismanagement, spurned offers of assistance, and rejected opportunities.

All of this aside, it comes down to a simple question. Is this building worth saving? The answer is yes.

We urge you to honor this landmark and reject this application. West Park Presbyterian Church should not be granted hardship. Thank you for the opportunity to share the Conservancy's views.