

# The Birmingham News

## Old Birmingham church aims for joyful noise as gospel center

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Pigeons fly in and out of a nest from a hole high above the choir stand in the sanctuary.

The nearly 90-year-old building remains quiet apart from the echoed sounds of birds rustling deep within the walls, but the disrepair and signs of age seem invisible to Creig



Hoskins and Constance Moore as they walk through the former McCoy United Methodist Church with flashlights, pointing to the stained glass, wood floors and wood-beamed, gabled ceilings.

"It's a beautiful building. It was very well constructed and solid," Moore says of the old church on Eighth Avenue West, near Birmingham-Southern College. "You can see the beauty of these spaces."

Both become excited when describing what they hope will be the building's rebirth as a gospel music center, studio and museum.

Their plan to turn the city-owned property into the Alabama Gospel Music Cultural Arts Center received a boost recently when the City Council approved spending \$35,000 to buy additional property nearby to aid in redevelopment.

The nonprofit center's board recently approved a five-year design plan to transform the former church. The first phase of the multimillion-dollar project includes a performance auditorium in the sanctuary, a visitor lobby and exhibit space.

The church's former education center is still in use as the McCoy Center for Community Service, where space is leased to social service agencies and an adult day-care center. The United Methodist Church sold the property to the city for \$350,000 after the congregation disbanded in 1993. The McCoy Center group has a long-term lease and manages the property's use by other groups.

Now, preservationists and music enthusiasts are ready for a revival.

Supporters say the project would restore faded property in a challenged part of town between Birmingham-Southern and Legion Field.

"The idea is to make the building alive at night as well as in the daytime," said Moore, a member of the McCoy Center's board of directors and a founder of the music center. "It's something for the community as well as visitors."

This side of the church has been vacant for 15 years. The city took steps to stabilize the exterior in 2002, including securing the roof and stopping further water damage. Mounds of drywall sit in corners throughout the old church.

"The good thing is that everything that has fallen down right now is cosmetic," said Hoskins, lead architect in the project. "The intent is to keep all the character of the existing building."

Hoskins envisions the creation of a new visitors center by adding a glass wall on the front of the building. Even with the additions, the original architecture and interior will remain preserved, he said.

"Everything that you see in here stays," Hoskins said, walking through the hull of the sanctuary, admiring its wooden pews. "We're just going to add the components that we need to add in order to make it the exhibit space that it needs to be."



Moore, who works at Birmingham-Southern, remembers going to McCoy as a student at the nearby college for Christmas services and other functions. And Birmingham-Southern, a United Methodist school, remains interested and supportive of the latest activity at the church, she said.

With the plan completed, the next step is fundraising. The group received a \$40,000 grant from the Alabama Council on the Arts and matching grants totaling \$40,000 from the Alabama Civil Justice Foundation, the Community Foundation of Greater Birmingham, the Daniel Foundation, the Hill Crest Foundation, Sixth Avenue Baptist Church and the Bush Hills Neighborhood Association.

The center will highlight gospel music past and present, and particularly the role of local and Alabama artists in creating and cultivating the art form.

"The idea here is we're using everything Alabama," Hoskins said. "Once you become familiar with it and you start appreciating it for what it is and what all came after it, then you realize that this is something great. I see a bright future for the project. This is something that was thought out, that has a lot of potential and is going to be great for the city."

Even with a seven-figure price tag, Moore said she's certain the concept will become a reality. Both she and Hoskins compared the center's potential cultural and tourism impact to that of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute downtown, a major city attraction.

"We have to search out those grants and foundations that are supportive of our mission," she said. "I believe this could happen. It is something that is lacking."

'Rightful place'

The area's gospel music, Moore said, "is not documented; it's not researched, and sometimes it's not validated ... We don't put it in its rightful place."

Mayor William Bell echoed other supporters, calling the project both cultural and economic. Bell said the more the city has to offer both residents and tourists, the more investment will spread from downtown throughout the entire city. Bell said the city is using its past to build on its future.

"It will absolutely be comparable with the things that the Civil Rights Institute has done for that corridor in downtown for this area of town," he said. "It's one of my goals to develop facilities and attractions throughout the city of Birmingham."