

St. Luke's Lutheran Church allowed to expand via street vacation

By Lee Perlman
The Southwest Portland Post

After struggling with pedestrian access issues, as the Southwest Neighborhoods, Inc. Board had before them, the Portland Planning and Sustainability Commission voted on June 28 to allow St. Luke's Lutheran Church to vacate two public rights of way to allow for an expansion.

The church at 6835 SW 45th Ave. has a congregation of 1,300, giving it the largest Lutheran congregation in Portland and the second largest in Oregon, church officials testified.

The church is straining the resources of its current building, built in 1960. The expansion could best be accommodated, they said, by vacating the unimproved Southwest 46th Avenue between California and Vermont streets, and the public right of way along Southwest Florida Street.

Among other things, this would allow expansion of the kitchen and fellowship hall, and allow the Sunday School to meet in quarters contiguous to the building rather than across the parking lot.

Wendy Collie of the Portland Bureau of Transportation said that the 46th right of way currently has a six-foot ditch for

storm water runoff next to a ten-foot gravel path.

The church has pledged to provide a new public pedestrian path elsewhere on the property when development occurs, Collie said. Regarding the Florida right of way, Collie said, "There's nothing there now that would make you think it's a street."

Representatives said that the church is active in community affairs. It provides space for 300 meetings a year, including those of the Southwest Trails Committee. It regularly provides food for the needy, and is host to the annual Grauer Back-To-School Project, in which backpacks full of supplies are

given to hundreds of needy school-age children.

Elise Moentmann said the church was "dedicated to environmental stewardship" and "being a good neighbor." She added, "Until the time comes for development, nothing will change." When change does come, "We believe both the church and the community will benefit."

Some critics thought that this was not enough. Hillsdale activist Glenn Bridger, and Roger Averbek on behalf of the Willamette Pedestrian Coalition, called for better and more assured pedestrian connections, especially running east and west on Florida.

Averbek noted that the intersection of Southwest Vermont Street and 45th Avenue represents the sort of "hub" of commercial activity that the planning concept of "20 minute neighborhoods" is based on, yet streets leading to it lack sidewalks. "This makes connectivity here extremely important, and we don't want to lose this opportunity," he said.

Transportation planner Lance Lindahl said that the parking lot of St. John Fisher Catholic Church, which is likely to remain indefinitely, stands in the way of Florida Street's right of way.

Commission member Irma Valdez called for granting the vacations. Opponents made "good points," she said, "but this is the church's site, and they're trying to do good things on a limited site."

Another Commission member, Don Hanson, agreed, saying, "I'm a huge fan of retaining rights of way, but here it would be a huge taking. This is a community service facility in many ways."

Commission member Chris Smith held out for stronger guarantees of future pedestrian connections, and cast the sole dissenting vote on the motion.

State legislature passes trails liability waiver; New law allows work on trails to resume

SOUTHWEST TRAILS

By Lee Perlman
The Southwest Portland Post

On June 28, Oregon Gov. John Kitzhaber signed into law a new trails liability waiver that will, among other things, allow the Southwest Trails network to resume operation and maintenance work.

HB2865 states, among other things, that neither public bodies nor private property owners are liable for injuries suffered by hikers while using "commuter" trails.

Such liability waivers already existed for "recreational" trails in parks and public lands. The new law extends this immunity to the Trail Network, which makes use of streets, public and private property, and public easements across private property that allows people to walk through areas lacking conven-

tional sidewalks.

The potential threat of lawsuits was a concern to private property owners that made them reluctant to allow their property to be used for trails, it halted volunteer trail maintenance work, and threatened to destroy the trail network, the product of decades of volunteer work.

The new law allows for safe use of the trails, and the resumption of maintenance and development work.

Although the main sponsor of the bill was Rep. Chris Garrett (D-Lake Oswego), former Southwest Trails Committee chair Don Baack gave strong credit for its passage to Sen. Ginny Burdick (D-Portland).

"She did what was necessary to get it through the legislature," he told *The Post*. "I'm very pleased that it's been passed." Burdick, in turn credited Baack and Hillsdale activist Glenn Bridger with giving "very effective testimony" for the measure during hearings.

Baack resigns from Southwest Trails Committee

Hillsdale activist Don Baack, founder of the Southwest Trails Committee and its longtime chair, announced last month that he is resigning from both the Southwest Neighborhoods, Inc. board and as chair of the Committee.

To *The Post*, Baack complained of "harassment" by some other SWNI board members that he said made it impossible for the Committee to do its work. He said he intends to form an independent trails group that will continue to carry out the vision of creating and maintaining a trails network.



Don Baack and his dog.
(Post file photo by Poulina Olsen)

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