

Ela Strong, President of the Executive Board of Fifth Church of Christ, Scientist project sponsor.

Supervisors —

Much has already been said about our proposed housing development and our Church has been largely left out of the conversation.

So what people may not realize is that our right to be able to engage in religious exercise is at stake here.

If this appeal is granted, our church will be blocked from engaging in its religious mission.

We cannot meet our religious needs in our current church building.

The proposed new church facility is essential for us.

Our mission requires that we have a church building that is welcoming and accessible to all who wish to enter.

We must provide a healing refuge to those seeking solace.
Our church must be an expression of God's welcoming love.

Our current building is the antithesis of a welcoming, accessible church.

- The Church's oversized concrete building is on a blighted street-front.
- Regularly, there is drug use and violence in front of the church.
- Tent encampments often block the front and side entrances. This severely limits access to the church by those seeking to enter.
- Garbage, human excrement, and used hypodermic needles must be cleaned up by the Church daily, sometimes several times a day.
- The Church's very own caretaker has been assaulted and is often subjected to racial slurs while cleaning the area in front of the church.
- A church member's car was recently attacked while she was in it.
- Individuals splicing the power cord in front of the church recently caused a fire. Some members are afraid to go to Church.

These conditions have resulted in a significant reduction in our church attendance.

I also must note that our many calls to city agencies — seeking help for those in need in front of our church — have been largely ignored.

The new Project would replace the current structure with a new church building — the design of which will be welcoming, light-filled, human-scaled — to reflect the Church’s spiritual mission of creating an atmosphere of light, warmth and healing.

Of critical importance —the 316 new housing units included in the proposed development — would provide much needed animation and a flow of people to the area, eliminating the unsafe conditions for our members.

This will remove barriers to access for Church members and allow for an atmosphere of healing, which is central to the Church’s mission.

It is also essential to our religious practice that we have a Christian Science Reading Room that is open to the public.

Our current facility cannot accommodate one.

A Reading Room is an integral part of our denomination and mandated by our Church’s bylaws.

A Reading Room is a neighborhood sanctuary where any individual can find hope, comfort, and healing.

Our Church cannot fulfill its religious mission without a Reading Room.

The proposed Church building will have a Reading Room, which will serve as a daily active presence in the neighborhood and allow the Church to fulfill this critical component of our religious mission.

Another requirement for our church is to have a Sunday School for children. The scene in front of the church discourages any parent from bringing their child into the building through the unsafe and unsanitary conditions.

Our new church will welcome the Sunday School children to a light-filled space designed just for them, fulfilling that essential part of our mission.

Let me reiterate that granting this appeal would prevent our church from engaging in our religious exercise in accordance with our mission.

The Planning Commission approved our project in June finding that it met all of the applicable elements of the General Plan, Planning code, and that the underlying Group Occupancy zoning is a principally permitted use in our district.

Recommendations from that hearing have already been agreed to with Planning, and we continue to implement them.

I'd like to add that the Appellant's claim that there has been a lack of community outreach and dialogue is simply false.

Between November of 2020 and August of 2021, the Project team held 48 stakeholder meetings, three canvassing events, and four community-wide meetings, as well as placing over 300 calls and emails to stakeholders.

It is in response to the input from the community and Planning Commission, that we have made significant revisions to the Project plans already.

Appellants' claim about a lack of community outreach has no basis in fact. This appeal cannot be granted on that basis.

Appellant's argument that the Project is not compatible with the Tenderloin community is also without merit, and cannot be the basis on which to block our new Church.

The proposed new church and housing development will enhance the neighborhood, enabling us to engage in our religious exercise, bringing healing to the neighborhood, eliminating blight on our block, and providing much needed housing to essential workers.

There is no lawful basis on which to grant this appeal.

Granting this appeal would violate the Church's federal civil rights under the federal RLUIPA (Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act) law, and the Constitution.

San Francisco is a city devoted to civil rights, diversity and our constitutionally guaranteed freedoms.

The implications of this appeal are much larger than many people realize and will impact both our civil rights and those of all communities of faith.

I ask you to have the courage to do what is right, and what is legal, and vote to deny this appeal. Please uphold the Planning Commission's approval and allow our church to build.

If the church is asked to go back to the former un-financeable project, it will prevent the church from being built and from continuing with our religious practice.

We also have a message from Michael Pappas, the Director of the San Francisco Interfaith Council, and it will be now read by Patricia Kephart.