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Grace Episcopal expansion plan raises BAR concerns

Church wins initial OK to add wing, repair steeple

BY JASON HARDIN
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One of Charleston's most spectacular church steeples is slowly collapsing. Grace Episcopal Church received initial approval Wednesday for a project that includes expanding the church and repairing the steeple.

The expansion will allow the Wentworth Street church to temporarily vacate the main building so structural repairs can be made, said Dan Beaman, a church member and architect on the project. The steeple is not in danger of imminent collapse, but

work needs to start soon, he said. "Time is of the essence," he said. The expansion plans, however, have some concerned that the new addition could detract from the steeple's appearance. Preservationists said the new wing, which includes an ornate stair tower, could draw attention away from the towering spire.

The city's Board of Architectural Review asked the church to study that issue but unanimously granted initial approval to the construction of the addition.

In addition to the structural concerns, the church is running out of room, officials said. It now has

more than 1,700 members, making it one of the largest Episcopal churches in the area.

"We're just overflowing," said church member Tommy Thornhill.

The expansion would be built on the west side of the church, on the site of a smaller, more recent building that the BAR agreed could be demolished.

The problem with the steeple is that its weight is forcing it to collapse slowly in on itself, said Beaman. The steeple can be strengthened, but the structural issues will

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force the church to use the new building during the meantime, he said.

The chief issue during Wednesday's BAR meeting was whether the three-story expansion could diminish the prominence of the steeple.

Preservationists suggested that a proposed stair tower and a large bay window be scaled down somewhat to allow the steeple to remain the clear center of attention. Jonathan Poston of the Historic Charleston Foundation said the steeple should remain one of the prominent features of Wentworth Street.

Some BAR members suggested pushing the expansion back from the street. Some defended the plans.

Board member John Moore noted that the board had encouraged "exuberant" designs in recent cas-

es and said the plans don't need to change.

"I can't imagine ... that the tower would detract from the main steeple of the church," he said. "I like it the way it is."

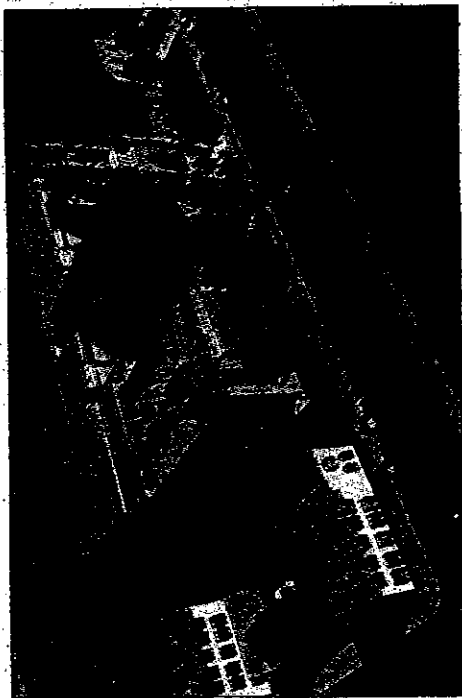
Beaman said the church can work with the board's suggestions.

The appearance of the church, which was built in the 1840s, has already been the topic of discussion recently.

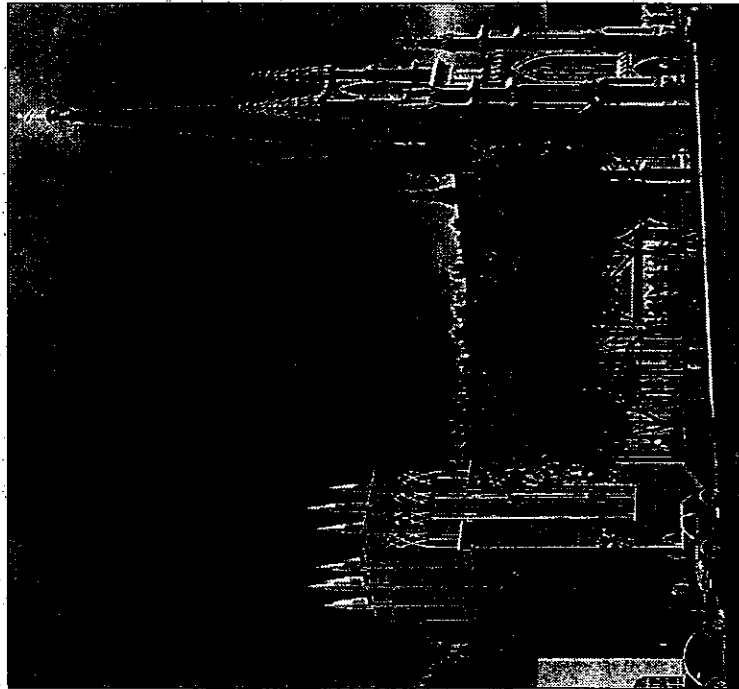
Some have complained that the church's appearance has already been marred by the College of Charleston's new Jewish Studies Center, which sits on the east side of the church.

The college building obscures the church from some angles, and its modernist design helped lead to a broader debate about the role of modern architecture in the city.

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PROVIDED BY CUMMINGS & MCCRAHY
This rendering shows the proposed expansion of Grace Episcopal Church on Wentworth Street.



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Another view shows the proposed expansion of Grace Episcopal Church. Preservationists expressed concerns Wednesday that the stair tower (foreground) could detract from the main steeple, which needs structural repairs.