

Congregational Church of Topsfield Updates

Emerson Fields questions – APRIL 27, 2019

1. **What is the Church doing with the Emerson Fields?**

The Church received an offer in fall 2017 from a developer of assisted-living/memory-care facilities. That offer is no longer active. However, the Church hopes to sell the land and is considering residential housing as well as an assisted-living/memory-care facility.

2. **What other uses have you considered for the Emerson Fields?**

In addition to an assisted-living/memory-care facility, the Church considered affordable housing, single-family housing, solar panels, Essex County Green Belt, farming, and summer camps. And we continue to be open to new ideas that will fit with the mission of the church, the needs of the town, and the revenue impact for town and church.

3. **Why assisted-living/memory-care?**

Such a facility would fill a need for assisted living and memory-care and provide the most financial relief to the church to help support its missions. Had the original offer gone through, the Town of Topsfield would have received \$200,000 additional annual income from real estate taxes.

4. **Why did the Church wait so long to tell its neighbors about considerations for Emerson Field?**

The Church spent more than a year exploring potential options for the fields, including several choices that would not require development. It took the Church more than a year to choose a path forward, but within just weeks of taking a vote of the membership, the Church met with abutters to inform them of our plans.

5. **Why not leave the Emerson Fields as they are?**

The Church spent more than a million dollars over the past 10 years maintaining two historic buildings on the Topsfield common, and costs are not expected to decrease. We are trying to find ways to keep pace with building expenses while continuing to fund local charities and offering our facilities to various town groups at low or no cost.

6. **If the Church sells the land, they'll just spend the money. Then what?**

If the Congregational Church sells the land, the money will go into a fund set up to support our buildings. This would free up stewardship money for charitable activities and church operations.

7. **Why doesn't the Church just cut expenses?**

Reducing maintenance on the historic buildings is a false economy since deferred maintenance is almost always more costly in the long run. If the Church stopped all charitable contributions, the money saved would still not cover maintenance cost and is contrary to the Church's purpose and mission. Many Church members donate specifically because of the charitable work done.

8. Why not cut Church staff and keep the Emerson Fields undeveloped?

Decades of history show that every time staff is cut, membership goes down. When membership goes down, pledges go down, and there's less money for building maintenance and everything else. (The Congregational Church receives no money from any national or international church body.) Cutting staff would not alleviate the chronic expense of building maintenance. Nor would it enhance giving to the charities that the Church supports. The Church needs a long-term funding plan.

9. The Emerson Fields has wetlands. How can anyone build on it?

The Emerson Fields cover approximately 12 acres. Several acres are wetlands or bordered by wetlands, and the actual buildable area is much smaller.

10. Does the current zoning allow a developer to build an assisted-living/memory-care facility on Emerson Fields?

Yes, but the current zoning regulations would require any developer to go through a special permitting process, in which the developer would have to comply with all relevant by-laws involving conservation, storm water management, traffic, septic, wetlands, light pollution, etc.

11. Why did people file a Citizen's Petition to restrict Nursing and Community Care Facilities in Topsfield?

The Citizen's Petition was done reactively to prevent the Emerson Fields from being developed (according to the Petition's main sponsor and spokesperson).

12. Would the Citizen's Petition impact more than the Emerson Fields?

Yes. The Citizen's Petition would prohibit any and all community care facilities in the Central Residential, Business Village, and Business Highway North zones.

13. I heard the current zoning regulations are an "oversight" and the Citizen's Petition is meant to correct that oversight.

The current zoning regulations were passed intentionally and were not a mistake. When they were proposed by the Planning Board in 2005, the Planning Board advocated specifically for community care facilities, saying they could "increase economic activity" and "provide important community services." The 2005 Town Meeting warrant contained the same language in explaining why the Town was recommending the zoning changes.

14. Does the Topsfield Planning Board support the Citizen's Petition?

Only 2 members the Planning Board were in favor of it; 2 were opposed, and 1 abstained. Usually, changes to zoning regulations are supported by the entire Planning Board – or, at the very least, a majority.

