

Battle Line Drawn at Church's Door

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A small group of residents in Western Queens are looking to begin a battle against over-development in their neighborhoods, and the front line could soon become a conflict involving the Astoria Presbyterian Church, which has tentative plans to raze its current building in favor of a residential high rise.

The Long Island City Alliance, a recently formed community organization, met with supporters last Thursday to introduce its ideas to the public and make its case against the church's plan to sell its existing, three-building facility.

In late August, the congregation voted 13-11 to develop the church property, though no specific proposal has been finalized. Facing possible bankruptcy, the church has considered erecting in its place a nine-story, 90 unit building that would still leave room for congregation services.

In contrast to a strongly worded and accusatory flyer that LICA recently circulated among the community, the group's members laid out a thoughtful set of objections to a possible development at the meeting.

Shannon Wilkenson, a member of LICA, said allowing the project to continue unabated would set a dangerous precedent for other churches around the city and country. "This could start a gold rush of money for other churches facing the same predicament," Wilkenson said. "The only thing that can stop them is us in Long Island City."

Unlike other property owners, churches do not need a community review before developing their land, Wilkenson said. She called for a reassessment of such laws and a general downzoning of Western Queens.

LICA is gathering signatures on a petition to stop Astoria Presbyterian from moving forward with its plans. Church officials have charged that the organization is spreading falsehoods about the congregation's intentions. Pastor Don Olinger told the Tribune last week that no final decision had been made, and he would continue to seek community input on the situation.

People at the meeting, many of whom were not yet members of the group, remain worried that the project could be detrimental to the neighborhood's quality of life. "What I'm concerned about is them putting up a 10-story building in an area where the infrastructure is already very taxed," said Frederick De Naples, a resident near the church.