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Pave History and put up a parking lot? Historic church struggles between preserving its past and securing its future

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By Tia Lynn Ivey, Managing Editor

“And don’t it always seem to go that you don’t know what you’ve got ‘til it’s gone? You pave paradise and put up a parking lot.” Those lyrics were penned in 1970 by hippie songstress, Joni Mitchell, but it is the Madison-Morgan Conservancy singing the tune today as the 100-year-old Sugar Creek Baptist Church in Madison possibly faces demolishment in order to make room for a new parking lot.

The church was approved for a demolition permit back in April, after the congregation voted to tear down the deteriorating building, deeming the sorely-needed repairs too costly for the small church’s budget. But as word spread of the plans, former church members and community groups sought to save the church from being destroyed. Despite offers from the conservancy to help create a community fundraiser plan to restore and maintain the church on site, Sugar Creek has opted to forego any restoration efforts, but is willing to give away the church for free to anyone who can move it to another location and restore it themselves. If an arrangement to move the church does not present itself within the next couple of months, then plans to tear down the

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historic white-steeple church will resume. According to Head Pastor Butch Jackson, the church is in the business of saving souls, not saving buildings. “My first priority is to the Lord, then to my congregation, and then to the community,” said Jackson. “Our church just wants to move forward and the old building needs to go. But if the community will help us, we will work with them to see to it that it’s saved somehow.”

Rusty Johnson, a deacon in the church, also supported either moving the church or having it torn down. “We just want to serve the Lord,” said Johnson. “That’s our bottom-line. A building is just a building, our focus is Christ and that is what we are looking toward.” But Christine McCauley, director of the Madison-Morgan Conservancy, believes a bulldozing is no way to commemorate the historic building’s 100th birthday. “It’s the oldest established congregation in the county and the building has stood on that corner for a century,” said McCauley. “It’s part of our story as a county and when the visual images of our history disappear that’s how we forget our own story.” Former Church member Bob Bumgarner is also against the church being demolished. “I think the destruction of this 100-year -old beautiful church will be a mistake, and one that even those who made the decision will regret,” said Bumgarner. “I am real upset about the church being demolished because it is a landmark in the community. I think it is just terrible that they would even consider it.”

According to Jackson, he understands the community’s disappointment, but believes the historic building no longer suits the congregation’s vision for growth and modernity. “Cosmetics are very important. Cosmetically, that church is just not pretty anymore. Everyone likes a big and nice modern church,” said Jackson. But it isn’t just the look of the church that’s the problem, said Jackson. The congregation of Sugar Creek Baptist Church, which dates back to 1806, vacated the century-old building because of structural instability, water damage, and mold beneath the floors and walls. According to Jackson, while restoring and renovating the historic building would have been ideal, not only does his congregation lack the financial resources to do it, but by time they complete all the changes they want to make, the church would not even be historic anymore. “We would have loved to save it, but we do not have the means to do it ourselves,” said Jackson, who estimated that it could take up to \$300,000 to restore the building and enlarge the sanctuary. “It would be at least that much to get it done they way we’d want and then it would be a completely new anyway...if the community is looking to us to do it ourselves, that’s just not possible for our congregation that is just barely making it from Sunday to Sunday. “ McCauley does not believe the building is hazardous and maintains that repairing it would be feasible. “We have already assisted in getting two contractors to the site to assess the structural integrity of the building, doing deed research, and providing materials conservation information,” said McCauley. “We think it would be a shame to tear down the church for a parking lot, especially when the structure is sound and in need of just a few repairs.”

According to McCauley, the Sugar Creek Baptist Church represents a unique part of Morgan County’s history. “Our mission is to protect the special places in this county and that’s one of them,” said McCauley. “It tells the story of our settlement and rural lifestyle. It is a typical image in a rural place and once those images go away, they never come back,” said McCauley, who noted Sugar Creek Baptist Church played a role in the formation of Morgan County. “Once a congregation of both black and white parishioners, the church split into two in 1867, just after the Civil War, when the African-American members built Smyrna Baptist Church just down the road. The white congregation built the current Sugar Creek Church building 100 years ago this year. And we think it’s an important visual reminder of Morgan County’s history. Once the building is gone, the story goes, too, since there’s nothing left to remember it by,” said McCauley. While McCauley aims to save Sugar Creek Baptist Church’s history, Pastor Butch Jackson has his eye on its future. “I personally would love to see it live on—a lot of souls were saved in that church and many revivals took place there. But emotions can only go so far before reality sets in. And what’s best for our church now is to move past the old building into a new one.” The current Sugar Creek Baptist congregation, comprised of about 70 members, now meets in a butler building behind the historic church. According to church treasurer Mae Buice, the congregation’s building fund only has \$8,000.

“We want the community to thrive and we want to be a vital part of the community. If it is a



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sentimental thing to the community, we will do what we can,” said Jackson. “We understand that history has a lot to do with it. We are finding that there is a sense of community pride here in Madison. There seems to me a real caring for the community and that is very touching. We, too, are a good, loving, concerned, godly people—that is what we are made of and we hope the community will see that.” In the meantime, the conservancy will continue to search for an interested party to move and restore the Historic Sugar Creek Baptist Church.

To find out more information about how you can help save the historic church, contact the conservancy at: 706-342-9252. While the future of the historic Sugar Creek Baptist Church building remains uncertain, it’s legacy will surely last. For over a century, countless praises and prayers have been uttered, weddings and holidays celebrated, funerals and tragedies mourned—the grim and glorious cycle of life and death has unfolded beneath the tiny white steeple of Sugar Creek Baptist Church, providing solemn solace for all who found sanctuary inside its welcoming walls.

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The Morgan County Citizen is Madison and Morgan County, Ga.'s weekly newspaper, and sole source for accurate, hyperlocal information.

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