

Kelso grad finds niche at Playboy

St. John Medical Center has purchased prime land near Lake Sacajawea from the First Baptist Church, which Tuesday unveiled details for what eventually will become one of the largest church complexes in Cowlitz County.

The Longview church, now located along Kessler Boulevard between the hospital and Kessler Elementary School, will build a 39,500 square-foot worship and office facility on nearly 9 acres at the corner of Seventh Avenue and Wheeler Street, near Home Depot.

The parcel used to be part of the old par 3 golf course.

Senior Pastor Kevin White said the church heard interest from developers and other churches, but it opted to sell its existing site to St. John for what hospital officials said was 2 million.

This was about getting a win-win for the community," White said. "Ultimately, we feel that selling to St. John will help the community."

The hospital says it needs the property to expand, but it does not have immediate plans.

White said he hopes the church will help the community by featuring a large grassy sports field, more parking, a large meeting space, educational rooms, a library and cafe area.

We want this to be a place where people can hang out at throughout the week, not just on Sundays," said White, who declined to disclose the cost of the new building.

The first phase of construction will be complete by January, White said. The second phase, which will add more seats and about 20,000 square-feet, will be built when membership increases and financing becomes available.

Until the first phase is complete, First Baptist will lease its current building from St. John.

"We had interest (for the lake front church property) from other businesses and other churches," White said. "But those other businesses didn't add up to a win-win like St. John did, and churches couldn't afford the land."

Hospital spokesman Randy Querin said the First Baptist property will allow for future expansion. The acquisition leaves only four residential properties on the entire block not owned by PeaceHealth, St. John's parent company.

"We are already starved for square footage at the hospital," Querin said. "This gives St. John a long-term presence there."

Querin said the hospital has some ideas on what to use the land for, such as office space. Because the land is zoned residential, "we now become partners with the city to see how to use those parcels."

First Baptist is affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention, the second largest religious body in the United States, with more than 16 million members. Unlike the parent group, which has had stable membership, First Baptist has been growing.

White, pastor at First Baptist for 13 years, said the church has outgrown its old location on Kessler Boulevard. Sunday attendance has more than doubled --- from 200 to between 400 and 450 --- since the mid-1990s.

The 54-year-old church doesn't have enough parking, wheelchair-accessible entrances or grassy areas for youth or sports events. "We've had people drive around our parking lot and not find a space and drive home," White said. "Our fellowship center is down two flights of stairs, and many people can't make it there and we can't all fit the entire fellowship at once."

First Baptist has been contemplating a new location for nearly a decade, and White is quick to point out it took everyone in the congregation to

accomplish the goal.

Many of the church's members pinched pennies to help pay for the new building. The church purchased the new site in April 2005 for 1.55 million, according to county records.

"People gave up their vacations, people sold things and people have given up ... those little luxuries to help" contribute to the construction costs, White said. "Over three years, it adds up."

White said he hopes the new church will help the church minister better to every age group and different lifestyles.

"I think this town is noted for the family atmosphere," he said. "And we want to be a part of that."

If you want to open a big biz that employees over a hundred, you have to jump through a lot of hoops. And the city will likely reject the idea. People want to rise above food service, especially if they eventually want to buy a house, live a good life, a secured retirement. Making a great living in this town is nearly impossible unless you are a divorce lawyer or doctor or law enforcer. In the medical field, people get hired at part time so forget about repaying college loans. Don't stand up for this town. It is full of hypocrisy and judgemental folk. It eats its young and subjects them to a fenced in mentality whose only connection to the outside world is cable and the internet. And kudos to those whose eyes and mind are opened to the happiness beyond Cowlitz. I moved to a big city far far away. I make in a day what I made in two weeks in Longview. I always read TDN to make me appreciate what I now have. Thank you and eat your vegetables.

About the Author

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