

**Special Congregational Meeting on Sustainability
June 1, 2021**

Minutes

Note: *The Special Congregational Meeting of June 1, 2021, was held via videoconferencing (Zoom) due to federal and state guidelines prohibiting in-person gatherings due to the Covid-19 pandemic; at the time of the Special Meeting all Sunday services, committee meetings and other First Parish meetings and gatherings had been held virtually since mid-March 2019.*

Welcome and Context Setting

Parish Board Chair Janet Britcher welcomed members to the meeting at 7:05 after Clerk Karla Baehr confirmed that more than 36 members had joined the meeting. (In order to hold a congregational meeting, First Parish bylaws require a quorum of 15% of active members. That number for 2021 is 36 based on a list prepared by the church administrator showing 240 members in good standing, i.e., members who have made a financial contribution since the July 2020.) Janet invited Rev Lisa to light a chalice and offer a reading. Rev Lisa shared *Forever Oneness* by the aboriginal poet Bee Lake. Moderator Jami Jordan invited members to read together the First Parish Mission and then invited everyone to read together our Covenant in Spanish and then English, explaining that our mission is the why we are here, while the Covenant speaks to how we will be together. She reviewed the ground rules for the meeting:

- One speaker at a time
- Listen with an open mind
- Speak for yourself (“I”)
- Tell your truths and let others tell theirs

The Moderator invited Janet to explain the context for this special members’ meeting on financial and environmental sustainability and preview the agenda. Janet reviewed the origins of the Board’s new policy on capital spending, the Finance Committee’s research and report on revenue and spending by comparable area congregations, and the proposal presented earlier this year from the Climate Justice Action Team to invest in solar panels. She explained the Board’s desire to support the congregation to be deliberate, intentional and planful with a focus on sustainability. She explained that both proposals being presented at this meeting have the support of the Finance Committee and Board.

Presentation of the Proposals

Treasurer Margaret Williamson presented the Financial Sustainability Proposal, framing it as a response to the question, **“How do we sustain our congregation financially over the long haul?”** She summarized the “take home” points from the Finance Committee’s winter 2021 Report to the Board and Congregation, *First Parish by the Numbers*. She described the need for \$12,500 to secure external consulting support to help us “figure out how to sustain our church economically so we can thrive in the future”. She described the organizational change process envisioned for the congregation to answer this question. She outlined what the consultant would provide:

- An outside perspective of where we have been, where we are now, and what needs to change
- Help to develop a five-year Action Plan with measurable goals and a timebound set of actions
- Regular follow-up sessions to ensure we’re on track and help us get past stuck points

Margaret concluded her presentation with a description of the process for selecting a consultant this summer and launching the work in the fall.

Incoming Board Chair Bob Williamson then presented the Environmental Sustainability Proposal, framing it as a response to the question, ***“How will we create an environmentally sustainable church for the First Parish congregations of the future?”*** He explained that the Climate Justice Action Team had reconsidered its original proposal to install solar panels and concluded that it was more important now to ask how First Parish can become a climate neutral church. Bob summarized the current state, explaining that our heating system is old, and its fossil fuel use is First Parish’s biggest contributor to global warming. The Climate Justice and Buildings and Grounds teams have agreed that they will need an estimated \$34,600 to pay for targeted expert outside help to do research and data gathering and identify the options available to us going forward and the costs of those options. He described the three phases of the work envisioned:

- Phase I: research and development to determine what levels of climate neutrality can be achieved and at what costs
- Phase II: community decisions about sustainability goals, strategies and funding
- Phase III: implementation over multiple years

Janet, Bob and Margaret responded to clarifying questions posed in chat about the two Sustainability Proposals. They focused on:

- The size and percentage of the endowment draw being recommended compared to prior years’ draws and the draw already approved for the operating budget
- Whether a capital campaign is envisioned or would be required
- The relationship between the two proposals
- Whether historical elements of the building have been taken into account in planning
- Whether the financial sustainability consultant would run the focus groups
- Anticipated costs for other capital spending on the building beyond the heating system

Board and Finance Committee member Steve Pratt-Otto explained that the FY22 endowment draw for the operating budget (already approved at Annual Meeting) amounts to 4.7% of the 3-year trailing average of the value of the endowment. He stated that the additional \$47,000 requested for the two sustainability proposals would add 2.3%.

Small Group Discernment in Breakout Rooms

Members went into breakout rooms with 8-10 others. Assigned facilitators had each group do the following for each of the proposals, spending approximately 15 minutes on each proposal:

- Individually write two reasons why the congregation needs to address this issue and two questions or concerns they have about the proposal
- Read their responses aloud
- Note trends, commonalities and differences among the responses
- Agree on two important statements to share with the whole group that reflects the small group’s consensus about the proposal

Everyone returned to the whole group.

Consideration of the Financial Sustainability Proposal

The Moderator asked facilitators to share with the whole group their summary statements that reflect their breakout room conversations about the Financial Sustainability proposal. Facilitators reported generally high level of consensus in support of both proposals with some questions and/or concerns remaining. One Facilitator reported that their group had not had time to discuss the environmental sustainability proposal, so no consensus had been reached about that proposal. She read a statement related to the financial sustainability proposal that the group had drafted and agreed upon: "Finance itself is part of a dynamic larger process that includes social justice, community, and mission - so we can support \$12,500 if the process and questions are framed with a social justice lens, growing our membership, and developing diversity in our programs."

There was discussion about whether or not we had achieved the 1/3 quorum our bylaws require to take a vote to withdraw funds from the endowment balance. The Clerk explained that First Parish bylaws require members to be present to count toward the quorum. Several members already on the Zoom call secured the presence of family members. The clerk announced that a quorum of 80 members present had been achieved.

The Moderator invited a motion to accept the Board's recommendation to:

Authorize the Board to withdraw up to \$12,500 for financial consultant support to help manage a strategic planning process related to financial sustainability.

After the motion was made and seconded, members the Moderator invited questions. Once Jami, Bob and Margaret had responded to these additional questions, the Clerk clarified that a person's presence on the Zoom call at the time of the vote is required to count toward the quorum.

Members voted overwhelmingly to approve the motion with no "nays" and 2 abstentions.

Consideration of the Environmental Sustainability Proposal

The Moderator asked facilitators to share with the whole group their small groups' statements reflecting their level of consensus on the Environmental Sustainability proposal.

The Moderator invited a motion to accept the Board's recommendation to:

Authorize the Board to withdraw up to \$34,600 for environmental consultant support to help assess our heating systems, propose an environmentally sustainable replacement strategy, and estimate its cost.

One member reported on her small group's agreement that the Board's full recommendation should be reflected in the proposal being voted on now. Reading from the minutes of the Board's May 5th meeting, she explained that the Board had recommended that the draw from the environmental consultant from the endowment:

"would be treated as 'pre-development expenses' and returned to the endowment if and when a capital campaign or other funding source for sustainability emerges."

The Moderator asked if the member making the motion (Tanya Gurian) and seconding it (James Shillaber) would accept the amendment. They agreed to do so. The Moderator ruled that Roberts' Rules of Order permit incorporating an amendment into an original motion when the persons making and seconding the original motion agree. Therefore, the motion as amended read:

Authorize the Board to withdraw up to \$34,600 for environmental consultant support to help assess our heating systems, propose an environmentally sustainable replacement strategy, and estimate its cost; and treat the endowment draw as ‘pre-development expenses’ and returned to the endowment if and when a capital campaign or other funding source for sustainability emerges.

Members voted overwhelmingly to approve the motion with no “nays” and 4 abstentions.

The Moderator asked Rev Lisa to extinguish the chalice and share closing words. She then asked for a motion to adjourn. Members approved the motion to adjourn, and the Moderator adjourned the meeting at 8:55 pm.

Respectfully submitted as a draft pending Congregational approval at the next Congregational meeting,

Karla Baehr
Clerk of the Parish

DRAFT