

The Berlin Sun

Stark Union Church get more optimistic view of structural issues

By Barbara Tetreault

STARK — The Stark Union Church Pew Owners Association will meet today, to discuss conflicting views of the condition of the historic church.

The association voted last month to close the church because of fears that the center roof truss is not structural sound and two other trusses are not in good shape.

A sag in the ceiling lead members to check the trusses. Two people who examined the trusses estimated the cost to fix them could range as high as \$100,000 and if the roof and ceiling have to be replaced because of the work the cost could range as high as \$200,000.



Stark Union Church Pew Association members William Joyce (right) and Deborah Joyce (center) met with state Sen. Erin Hennessey (left) and N.H. Division of Historical Resources Director Benjamin Wilson last Tuesday to discuss the condition of the historic church. (BARBARA TETREAUULT PHOTO)

But last Tuesday, N.H. Division of Historical Resources Director Benjamin Wilson examined the truss and delivered a more optimistic prognosis. "I don't think there is any worry about anything collapsing," he said, as he climbed down the ladder after venturing into the attic for a first-hand look at the roof trusses.



N.H. Division of Historical Resources Benjamin Wilson climbs down the ladder after checking the condition of the roof trusses in the Stark Union Church. Holding the ladder are Pew Association Vice President Dan Peel and trustee Phil Stearns. (BARBARA TETREAUULT PHOTO)

Wilson said he believes there is a natural crack in the center truss as a result of the vibrations from nearby Route 110 and the cost to repair it will be more modest than the estimates. He said he could not see any rot in the trusses and said he believes the building is structural sound. Wilson praised the job the association has done taking care of the 1853 building.

Pew Owner Association trustee Bill Joyce said Wilson's evaluation was different than that of historic building consultant Jan Lewandoski. Lewandoski had indicated the repair would be more extensive and expensive. Joyce noted the association wants to be careful not to do anything that would violate the building's designation on the National Register of Historic Places.

Wilson suggested the association hire someone to cut open a section of the ceiling to allow a look underneath the truss in question. He said he would forward to the group the names of some experts to look at the trusses.

Wilson and State Sen. Erin Hennessey (R-Littleton) discussed possible funding sources including a NH Land and Community Heritage Investment Program grant and a Moose Plate Grant. In both cases, the association would be looking at funding in 2022. Joyce noted the association has already received about \$18,000 in donations as news of the church's condition has spread.

Along with Joyce and his wife, Deborah, Association Vice President Dean Peel and trustee Phil Stern met with Wilson and Hennessey.

With autumn foliage nearing peak, several tourists stopped to take pictures of the church and covered bridge with the Devil's Slide in the background while the group met outside. The scene is one of the most photographed in New England.

Too small to support a single denomination church in Stark back in the mid-1800s, the various religious organizations decided to build a "union" church that all faiths could share. To raise money to build the church, the 48 pews in the church were sold and many of the pew deeds have passed on through the generations. Pew owners pay annual dues to support the church. Local organizations have worked hard to help raise money for the upkeep of the church.

In recent years, the Groveton United Methodist Church has held weekly church services at the Stark church. The building is also rented out for various religious functions.