



# If an old church falls in the woods...

*By Jackson Atkins*

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## ***How the fate of a historic small-town church is decided, and what it says about how we value history.***

It's a Monday evening in October and a group of about forty people has gathered in Fellowship Hall at St. Hubert Catholic Church in Chanhassen, Minnesota. We are here for a townhall meeting to discuss a question people have been putting off for years: *what do we do with the old church?*

The historic Church of St. Hubertus sits just across the highway from the current church, on the old main street of Chanhassen. Built in 1887, it is the oldest structure in the city still in its original location.

By European standards, the church is just a baby, but here in the Midwest it stands out for its historic charm. The brick exterior culminates in a classic bell tower and steeple. Rows of arched, stained glass windows flank its sides. Venture inside and you'll find a gorgeous vaulted ceiling, and hand-carved woodwork dating back to the time it was built. It's a cool old church.

The meeting begins with a presentation by Father William Kratt, associate pastor of the parish. After a brief overview of the history of the old church building and its many uses over the nearly 140 years since it was built, Father Will gets to the present day reality. The church is falling apart.

You can see that too if you visit the church. The moss-covered roof is badly in need of repair. Windows are broken. The wiring was installed back when electricity was still the new thing. The plumbing and heating also need updating. Not to mention the pests, lead paint, and asbestos. In its current state, the building is hardly usable for anything at all.

The options, as Father Will presents them, are pretty straightforward: invest millions into restoring and repairing the church, or spend a much smaller (though not insignificant) amount to raze the building. Doing nothing is not really an option anymore — if the decision is put off much longer, the church might just up and collapse of its own accord.

After the presentation, Father Will opens up the floor for questions and comments from community members. Opinions are split, sometimes across family lines. To many, it seems to be a simple decision — destroy the old money pit that no one is currently using and start fresh. To others, it seems just as simple — the church is a landmark and an important historic site for both the parish and the community as a whole. It must be saved. How do you put a price tag on history?

The estimates to restore and repair the church range from \$2.5 million to \$3.9 million. The lower figure would cover the full restoration of the church. The larger figure would include some additions, such as more bathroom facilities, to make the site more amenable to hosting events. Razing it would cost about \$144,000. Regardless of what is decided, as the owner of the building and property, the parish is on the hook for raising the funds.

At the end of the meeting, Father Ralph Talbot, current pastor of the church, joins the discussion. He seems to be as torn on the issue as anyone, which makes sense. It is his job to weigh the current and future needs of his flock, and placing a concrete value on history is no easy task. Ultimately, he says, the decision will fall on the community as a whole.

So they are sending out a survey. A referendum on the value of history.

One thing is for certain — if there is a historic landmark in Chanhassen, it is the old church. Founded by immigrant German Catholics, the original name of the village was St. Hubertus. The town grew around the church, not the other way around. It is one of two buildings in Chanhassen on the National Register of Historic Places. But its historical significance doesn't mean anything if you don't care about history. So the question is one of values, and very personal ones at that.

I am biased. I grew up a block away from the old church. I went to elementary school at St. Hubert Catholic School, and attended mass at the new church many Sundays. My maternal grandparents are buried in the cemetery behind the old church. My parents are founding members of the Chanhassen Historical Society. And besides all that, I just happen to like old stuff. But is it just personal nostalgia and aesthetics?

When I went to the meeting, I wasn't sure what to expect. Chanhassen has changed so much since I lived there as a kid. Once a small farm town, it's now expanded, developed into a full-on suburb. It's wealthy. It has as many fast-casual dining options as a large airport. It also routinely makes the list for "[best places to live](#)" in financial magazines.

I guess I mostly went to the meeting to get a feel for the general sentiment, so I could prepare myself for the possible destruction of an icon of my childhood and hometown. And I accomplished that. But the dilemma faced by the parish, and the inherent questions it raises, really got me thinking.

Those articles that name Chanhassen as a great place to live use metrics to compare it to other places. Quality of schools, healthcare, safety, green spaces... all these data points are considered. But how does access and exposure to history affect quality of life, if at all? Has this been studied?

Indeed it has, and the short answer is yes, living in areas with “a higher density of historic assets” is beneficial. One [study](#) concluded “people living in places with greater historic built environment experienced higher levels of personal relationships, social network support, and civic engagement.”

And yes, some of it is aesthetics: “Particularly, areas with heritage assets may provide both socially inviting and aesthetically pleasing environments that could help strengthen community and restore pride in place.”

At the moment, though, the only study truly relevant to the residents of Chanhassen is being conducted right now.

I’m not sure what the survey results will reveal about the values of the Chanhassen community. The parish leadership has been, to my eyes, candid and transparent about the process of making this decision. They opened up the church to supervised tours several times in the weeks leading up to the town hall meeting, giving many residents their first glimpse inside. They seem to really want the community to understand what is at stake. But they also want them to know what it will cost.

Personally, I hope they save the old church. The only thing I really know about tearing down a historic building is you can only do it once.

*For more information, visit the Chanhassen Historical Society website [here](#).*