

FMA Ad-Hoc Resources Committee Educational Property Scenarios:

Right Use of the Real Property of the Friends Meeting of Austin (FMA)

The resources discernment process initiated by the Meeting for Worship with Attention to Business stemmed from a leading that the Meeting needed to assess the uses of its financial and human resources in light of our accumulation of assets through past sales of property and recent bequests. The second need for assessment was identified as a result of the challenges in retaining members and engaging members and attenders in committee work.

Some of the leadings that arose from the resources discernment process addressed the right use of the Meeting's real property to its fullest potential – our meetinghouse, the outbuildings, and the land on which they are located. It is important to note that the scenarios below are intended only as illustrations of available options, some of the potential trade-offs that the Meeting's decisions may involve, and the interactions among some of the scenarios, e.g. B and C, which suggest that some sequencing of the Meeting's initiatives may be necessary.

These ideas organize themselves under the query "How are we aligning the property's use by FMA and the broader community with the testimonies of the Religious Society of Friends? How might we increase that use and improve that alignment going forward?"

A number of facts undergirding such a query have emerged from the resources discernment process to date. Some of those related to the Meeting community itself.

- The Ad-hoc Resources Committee recognizes that our primary limiting resource is our members' and attenders' time and energy.
- The meetinghouse, outbuildings and grounds benefit from extensive care provided by many members and attenders, especially those serving on the House and Grounds Committee.
- Substantial amounts of time and energy of Finance and Administration Committee members are devoted to the financial aspects of property ownership and of serving as a landlord to several tenants.
- Community Relations spends large amounts of time on renting out our space.
- Roughly \$45,000 or 45% of the FMA's total yearly expenditure is committed to the costs of maintaining the property and utilities.

Other facts reflect issues and needs in the larger community outside of our Meeting.

- A major challenge for our city is its rapid growth and the explosion of real estate prices. This hits particularly hard on those with low incomes and the City of Austin calculates that over the next decade 60,000 additional low income housing units will be needed.

- It's not just families and individuals who are hit by these rising costs. Social change organizations need space for their activities and donations are not keeping up with what this space costs. It is also a need which is unlikely to be addressed by city or federal housing programs.

As space for worship on many levels, the property gives the “church” – as George Fox would define it, our community of members and attenders – and other faith communities a physical location in which to nurture and grow our individual and community spiritual well-being.

- Friends’ leadings around earthcare call for a commitment to the sustainability of the land, grounds, creek, and habitat of the property.

The following scenarios illustrate much of what the Ad Hoc Resources Committee heard in its conversations with the FMA community – ways in theory that the Meeting can “feed several birds with one scone”. The scenarios are not proposals, but rather starting points for understanding how any action arising from the resources discussion will ripple out to touch multiple aspects of our members’ and attenders’ leadings. Any conversations with outside organizations have been to gather information and gauge interest of potential partners without making commitments on behalf of FMA.

Scenario A

In high price areas such as Austin, the largest component of property cost is the land, not the buildings. We have lots of land. We own 131, 786 sq. ft. of land. Even allowing for the part of our land which is in a flood plain and cannot be built on, we have lots of land which could be used for other purposes.

One alternative would be to sell our existing land and buy a smaller property with a building or buildings that are newer and in better shape. However, There is no guarantee that we could find a satisfactory property. What would be far better if there was a way we could continue to use those parts of the land which we currently use for religious activities and make the rest of the land available to other uses.

A way this could be accomplished is by leasing, not selling, parts of our land to an organization which we would develop to build buildings on our property which could be used for low income housing and office space for non-profits. The organization would also be responsible for finding tenants for the property and for collecting rents. In many respects, this organization would be very much like a for-profit real estate management company.

The major difference would be that the company would be required to rent out the buildings at below market rates to only specific types of tenants. We would lease our land to this company at low enough rates so that they could afford to rent to tenants below market rates.

The day-to-day operations of the company, including maintenance of that part of the property used for religious purposes, would be run by real estate professionals with members of the Meeting, along with others, serving on the board of the company.

We would engage the help of professionals for any detailed design of any buildings on the property, with FMA setting general directions or principles.

Given the limitations of the buildings currently generating rent, we should be open to imagining that the only buildings on the property are those currently used for religious activities. We should be open to the idea of a multistory building – one as compact as possible to preserve green space and limit impervious cover.

Any plan needs to include provisions for our creek area. This area cannot be built on and it contains some noteworthy plant species. At the present time, this area is gradually being taken over by invasive species, including poison ivy, which will eventually drive out the rarer native plants and trees. Because of the poison ivy, it is becoming inaccessible to those who are allergic. We need a plan to preserve the important plants in this area which also allows members of the Meeting, visitors and tenants to enjoy them.

The surprising thing is that it might not take much of our money to build new buildings. Below-market rates on loans if available might mean the rent from our tenants would be sufficient to pay the mortgage. If we built low income housing, there are other possible source of funding. The Meeting should not be constrained by the existing buildings or location.

Scenario B

Friends Meeting of Austin's property is blessed with a spring-fed creek, Tannahill Branch, which runs along the entire western side of the property.

Along the creek, there are large trees: American elm, pecan, cedar elm, hackberry, box elder, cottonwood, chinaberry, and mulberry. The understory includes young trees (see above list), giant ragweed, grape, sticky willy, lice, native sedge, Virginia creeper, neglecta, cow itch vine, rescue grass, TX geranium, annual bluegrass, dewberry, trumpet creeper, vetch, vitex, crepe myrtle and poison ivy.

Having on our property an area of natural beauty, even though small, if managed well, could be a spiritual gift to ourselves and to our neighbors.

One plan for the area could include:

- creating a simple worship circle in the area of the creek just below the current fenced in school playground where three large trees could provide shade during the sunny months. It is near enough to the creek that the running water can be heard, and far enough from the road to be relatively quiet.
- creating a food forest (a food forest, or forest garden, is a garden that mimics the structures of a natural forest, with multiple layers of plants stacked vertically to increase overall production) in the small area beside the road as it starts up the hill from the lower parking lot.
- creating a walking path along the creek for the enjoyment of our Meeting adults and

children, the school children, the neighbors – and dogs, if that met with the approval of the Meeting.

- clearing out the poison ivy and other invasive species to enable the wanted species to thrive and then seeding it with a few other native plants, the goal being to enable the creek area to manage itself as much as possible.
- clearing the creek of urban materials, such as tires, plastic, building materials, etc.
 - participating in the Adopt-A-Creek program
 - providing space for an art installation
- checking on whether we should protect the creek area from run-off from the upper parking lot.

There are a number of organizations that we could turn to for help:

1. Lady Bird Johnson Wildlife Center. We have already met with a volunteer from the Wildlife Center to walk the property with us, identifying species and talking about possible actions FMA could take.
2. ARocha, A Rocha engages and equips Christians to deepen their connection to God through the active care of creation. They work in both sub/urban and rural contexts to help restore and maintain healthy ecosystems through a hands-on, community-based approach.
3. Austin Watershed Protection Department: protects lives, property and the environment of our community by reducing the impact of flood, erosion and water pollution.
4. Capital Area Master Naturalists instruction and volunteer opportunities to adults who wish to learn about and demonstrate the principles of sustainable use, conservation, and maintenance of our natural resources.
5. Austin Permaculture Guild: the greater central Texas community by connecting people to courses, events, resources, and professionals made accessible to everyone.
6. CentexAudubon

Scenario C

FMA engages a non-profit long-term lessee partner for the property with long-term leaseback of the meetinghouse and classroom spaces for use by FMA for a nominal sum, under the following terms.

- Non-profit partner constructs affordable housing units and related parking on the property as permitted by the City of Austin's floodplain, protection and other development requirements.
- Non-profit partner leases school building or other space to a school that charges tuition consistent with the affordability mission of the property's development and with the testimonies of the Religious Society of Friends. The Meeting should consider the possibility that this adversely affects broader community of Austin by undermining the public schools system.
- Non-profit partner is responsible for upkeep of the land and buildings on the property, as well as related costs. This would reduce demand for funds that otherwise can be invested in testimony-friendly instruments and/or activities.

- Non-profit partner works with a reconstituted House and Grounds Committee as Meetinghouse Uses Committee to facilitate use of the meetinghouse by other faith communities, social services agencies, and other nonprofits serving communities of color. This would reduce demand for human resources; assuming new committee would be smaller than current committee because the scope of activity would be more limited. FMA should consider the fact that meeting use of the meetinghouse has to be balanced with use by other organizations.
- Non-profit maintains the lease at current terms of La Casita to Austin Tan Cerca de la Frontera.