



Release to Area Media

August 8, 2012
For Immediate Release

Contact: Dave Hurst, 536-7986
Project Manager
Dave@steeplesproject.org

Johnstown churches' preservation effort earns state award

JOHNSTOWN, PA – Efforts to save three historical church buildings within the Cambria City National Historic District here are receiving statewide recognition.

The Steeples Project, which seeks to conserve and find sustainable reuses for three former Catholic churches, is one of the recipients of the 2012 Pennsylvania Historic Preservation Awards, announced today by Preservation Pennsylvania. The Steeples Project's award recognizes a coalition of groups whose combined resources and volunteer efforts led to the buildings' acquisition by a Jennerstown, PA-based nonprofit corporation, 1901 Church, Inc., on Dec. 30, 2011.

“We are honored and pleased to be receiving this award from Preservation Pennsylvania,” said Teresa Marafino, President of 1901 Church, Inc. “It brings deserved recognition to individuals and organizations that made The Steeples Project possible.”

In early 2008, the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown announced that it would be consolidating five parishes that had been spiritual homes for six distinct ethnic groups within the Cambria City neighborhood for more than a century. After studying the situation, the Diocese closed three churches in July of 2009 – SS. Casimir and Emerich, St. Columba and Immaculate Conception. A grassroots group of affected parishioners formed “Save Our Steeples” and worked to save the closed buildings by holding fundraisers and staging special events there.

“We couldn't be more pleased that the hard work of our group since 2008 has not been in vain,” said Rose Howarth, co-founder of SOS, which now has become the Friends of The Steeples Project and is supporting ongoing efforts to care for and develop the buildings. “We will continue to focus on the future of these former churches.”

The Johnstown Area Heritage Association (JAHA) worked with SOS, arranged additional funding and obtained the services of Partners for Sacred Places, a Philadelphia-based nonprofit that assists with the preservation of vintage church buildings. Partners organized and facilitated a community visioning event, called a

charrette, and have been consulting with project leaders ever since. Lift Johnstown, an umbrella group that coordinates public projects and volunteer efforts, also worked on the charrette, and the local Community Foundation of the Alleghenies provided some key funding. Then the small nonprofit, 1901 Church, stepped forward and agreed to take on the ambitious responsibilities involved with trying to save three 100-year-old, architecturally distinctive, special-use buildings. The Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown also assisted by arranging for a property exchange that was manageable by 1901 Church.

“The entire community has responded in a positive way to this situation and deserves to share in this award,” said Brad Clemenson, a coordinator for Lift Johnstown and a member of the 1901 Church, Inc. Board of Directors. “Everyone wants to see these buildings saved because they define this historic, ethnic neighborhood so distinctly.”

1901 Church is pursuing visions for each of the former churches, which are contributing structures within the Cambria City Historic District and can add more attractions to the existing Cambria City Cultural District. The group hopes to reopen the former Immaculate Conception later this summer as a reception and music hall. A restaurant, catering and other re-uses have been proposed for the former SS. Casimir and Emerich, and funding is being sought to assess the feasibility of using the former St. Columba as a theater for dramatic arts. The proposed theater would be a venue for a dramatic pageant, interpreting the challenges that immigrants faced in coming to work in America.

“We haven’t saved any of these buildings yet,” cautioned Marafino. “There’s a lot of redevelopment work that must be done – and a lot of money that must be raised to pay for it – before sustainability is achieved for these beautiful spaces.”

The Steeples Project is being honored with the PHMC Theme Award, which was “William Penn’s Legacy: Religious and Spiritual Diversity.” Representatives will receive the award on September 28 in York, during a luncheon and program.

#

Media Advisory: Photos of the former churches are available upon request.