

Development Activities Meeting Report (Version: 01/24/2024)

This report created by the Neighborhood Planner and included with staff reports to City Boards and/or Commissions.

Logistics	Stakeholders
Project Name/Address: 731 Excelsior St (Community Center Use)	Groups Represented (e.g., specific organizations, residents, employees, etc. where this is evident): Allentown CDC board members Hilltop Alliance staff DCP staff Applicant [Abiding Missions]
Parcel Number(s): 14-B-52	
ZDR Application Number: BDA-2024-07978	
Meeting Location: Virtual on Zoom	
Date: March 10, 2025	
Meeting Start Time: 6:00 pm	
Applicant: Abiding Missions	Approx. Number of Attendees: 6
Boards and/or Commissions Request(s): ZBA [Zoning Board of Adjustment] - Use Variance request for a Community Center (General) Use	

How did the meeting inform the community about the development project?

Ex: Community engagement to-date, location and history of the site, demolition needs, building footprint and overall square footage, uses and activities (particularly on the ground floor), transportation needs and parking proposed, building materials, design, and other aesthetic elements of the project, community uses, amenities and programs.

Applicant is seeking approved use of the building at 731 Excelsior Street, Pittsburgh PA 15210. This application is not for any proposed work on the building. The building is used to house a community nonprofit that provides human services to the immediate area. These services include: afterschool program, food pantry, and community gatherings. The building contains office spaces for the employees of Abiding Missions. Applicant showed a current floor plan. The full building is approximately 7,500 sq ft. Activity spaces are on the first floor and the basement floor. These spaces total 4,544 sq ft. The building contains 3 offices (129 sq ft., 80 sq ft., 176 sq. ft.). There is a 313 sq ft. kitchen. The building has 2 restrooms, one for women and one for men, each with 3 toilets. There is a working elevator, which is inspected and serviced by Green Elevator and OTIS. The main activity spaces are used for an afterschool program, food pantry, and other community gatherings. The afterschool program has up to 30 youth in it, and the food pantry serves about 100 individuals each week.

Applicant needs to get a use variance and are not asking to change or renovate their building. Abiding Missions was established in 2017 and provides social services in their location on Excelsior St. Applicant described in detail their programs and populations served. To name some of them, their programs include an after-school program/youth development program, community/basic needs support (e.g. warming center, case management for housing), and food access programs (both on-site and door-to-door distribution serving 1,000 people every quarter). They own the main 731 lot and side lot 734 which has a chicken coop and is used for gathering and kids play there. The building is the site of the former Bethlehem Lutheran Church. Applicant showed visuals/images of their site and building. Abiding Missions has seen an architect to explore feasibility to renovate their building to more easily conduct their programming, but have not made structural renovations. Basement floor includes an activity space, restrooms, kitchen,

elevator, ADA entrance, and office space. Basement floor uses include after-school programming, community breakfast weekly, weekly food pantry, community meetings, winter warming center, laundry/utility, staff office space, and kitchen (hoping to improve exhaust and fire suppression system in future to use kitchen more fully). First floor existing uses – after-school programming, weekly piano lessons, community events/meetings, community worship space (not currently being used for worship), weddings/funerals/baptisms, office space. Second floor usage – storage, stained glass, bell tower that is not in use. The goal is to shift use from church to community use because that is the building's main function and worship is not currently materialized in regular frequent manner.

Input and Responses

Questions and Comments from Attendees	Responses from Applicants
So the zoning change is primarily for kitchen work? That is what the Ave of Hope grant is being used for?	Ultimately yes, but that is not what this current application is for. We are working with a contractor for kitchen renovations and found when we submitted permits that our occupancy permit was either missing or incorrect and that we are improperly zoned for the usage of the building. We need to have that change of use for the building and then we will move forward with a separate permitting process for kitchen upgrades.
This is strictly to recategorize yourselves from a church to community use as you aren't holding weekly worship services? While All Saints and Souls has a Christian flair to it, you're not holding regular services, you're doing the mission of doing the work?	Yeah. This is a correction of the use, which probably should have happened eight years ago when we acquired the building, but the board and founder probably didn't know that at the time. We are correcting it now in good faith so we can move forward with some other processes.
You would now be categorized as a community gathering space?	Community center Use
[DCP staff:] <i>[provided clarification about zoning use classification distinction between a church use and a Community Center (General) use. Community Center (General) use is by-right not permitted in single family-detached housing zoning district, and that use is different than the building's currently listed use as a church.]</i>	
Several years I've been here, I've watched Abiding Missions operate in that scope more of community center than a worship center.	
It makes sense to me and I appreciate the applicant sharing the information.	
I don't question it. Abiding Missions is doing incredible work in Allentown. I am amazed by them and the work they are doing. They really are an asset to Allentown.	

Questions and Comments from Attendees	Responses from Applicants
Thank you for the presentation. The drawings were great.	

Other Notes

The Executive Director of Abiding Missions is a board member of Allentown CDC (the RCO hosting the meeting).

Timeline from DCP staff:

- We will be publishing a staff report before the hearing
- There has to be at least 30 days between the DAM and the ZBA hearing for public comment
- RCOs and other orgs/members of the public are welcome to send letters of comment, questions, or support about the project and can provide testimony/comment to ZBA

Planner completing report: AD, TS