

Fayetteville church hopes to break ground this summer

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Church Interior

Phase 1



With Future Phases



Soaring construction costs and supply chain issues spurred by the pandemic delayed nearly every construction project for months. Church construction projects were no exception.

But finally, St. Joseph Church in Fayetteville is moving ahead with its plans after months of delays and a 33-percent increase in construction costs from January 2021 to May 2023.

Bob Mahler, new church coordinator at St. Joseph and a capital campaign leader, spoke to *Arkansas Catholic* in February about construction.

"We're in the process of finalizing the construction documents, which is the phase you need to complete before ... we can put together the bid documents that you would send out to the contractors to bid on the project," Mahler said. "So we're hoping to have that done in the next 30 to 45 days."

Paula Thiessen, former principal of St. Joseph School and chairperson of the building committee, said the process began in 2017 when St. Joseph Church bought seven and a half acres of land on the north side of the current St. Joseph School and Chapel Center.

"We started planning for the church back then," Thiessen said. "We started off with focus groups and a parish-wide survey to figure out what our parishioners wanted in a church, and we were interrupted by COVID."

Planning for the church building actually began in 2014 when the parish moved its school and built a chapel center at the new location. Holding Masses in the chapel center, it made plans to build a church on the new site as more funds were raised.

Efforts were renewed during the pandemic when parishioners gathered more information and raised funds.

Based on the total parishioner pledges/payments and to meet diocesan loan requirements, the church construction budget is \$11 million. According to a campaign guide dated Oct. 12, 2021, Lynch Development Associates suggested St. Joseph Church set a capital campaign goal of \$5.5 million following a feasibility study done in February and March 2021.

In February, the parish announced the total amount pledged at the close of the formal capital campaign was \$7,167,138.11. Of this amount, \$2,718,728.30 in pledges remain to be collected.

"There was a period where there was not a lot of activity for about 18 months or so," Mahler said. "But we were able to complete the (capital) campaign in the fall of 2021. Our parishioners were extremely generous, and we were able to exceed our goal by a significant amount."

Church construction project of this size also requires approval from the Vatican.

In February, the St. Joseph Church said it hopes to get Vatican approval of the loan in May or June and hold its groundbreaking this summer.

"We've waited a long time, and we're happy to finally be at this point in the project and to give our parishioners a church that they have waited for, and that includes elements that they want to see in their permanent church while staying with the budget and being fiscally responsible," Thiessen said. "This will also be a phased project too, because we're not able to build all of it in the first phase. Coming out of COVID, construction costs went up a great deal, and it was hard to get materials ... Our construction manager says that prices are getting a little bit better, so maybe the timing was good for us."

In phase one, construction will include seating for 688 people with added capacity to 802 people, two confessionals, an elevated altar, sacristy and separate altar server and work sacristies, an unfinished choir loft, a sealed concrete floor and basic arches and columns.

As more money is raised, the parish will complete the choir loft, expand seating by pushing out the east wall and adding transepts, cry rooms, stained glass, decorative lighting, enhanced ceilings and columns, enhanced flooring, a covered drop-off area, bell tower and a plaza at the front of the church.

Construction is expected to take 18 months for phase one.

"Phase (one) will be to get us into the building," Thiessen said.

Recent growth in northwest Arkansas determined many of the changes between the current church and layout plans.

"This will free up space in the current building," Thiessen said. "The school has also grown, as well as the number of parishioners in the church, which is a blessing. So that space that we are

currently using as a chapel center will be able to be utilized by the school and the parish and by parish groups as an auditorium and large meeting space. We need more meeting space. We need more office space, youth ministry needs more space, and some of that section that we'll be vacating when we move to the (new) church will be available for those things."

Additionally, Thiessen said the extra space will make it easier to do more things on St. Joseph property at different times.

"The cafeteria is right by the chapel center, because we have a folding door that opens up that we use for Masses when we need more seating space," Thiessen said. "And if a funeral fell during school hours, it was a bit tricky dealing with kids getting their lunch and keeping the noise down. So this will alleviate a lot of that."

Thiessen said this new layout would even help boost security around the school grounds, in addition to designating a separate building for prayer, instead of noise and foot traffic between the school and church.

"It will add to the liturgical peace in the Mass that is more sacred and directs you more toward God," Thiessen said.

Now the groundbreaking is near, Mahler and Thiessen said they are thankful their years of service to their parish are coming to fruition.

"I can't tell you how many holy candles I've lit," Thiessen said with a laugh. "We got to a tough point, and I just had to turn to God and say, 'OK, I know you have a plan for us. And I have to trust that.' It's just not in my time, it's in God's time."

Pastor Father Jason Tyler said he is excited for what the future holds.

"It's exciting to be part of building a new church, especially in a community that has been waiting for it so long," Father Tyler said. "It's wonderful to think of what it will be, even as the details and particular tasks of making it happen can take a lot of time to get set. I'm thrilled to see the continued parishioner support for the project as people long for the day that we move into it. God willing, I look forward to breaking ground this summer."