

Historic tower, memorial gardens project back on track

written by Alesia Schaefer |



TONTITOWN — For years the bell tower at St. Joseph Church in Tontitown beckoned people to come to Mass, but since the demolition of the old parish church, the tower has quietly stood watch over the burgeoning community and the parish that is steeped in history.

The iconic tower, on the western corner of the campus, was the only structure left standing following the old church's demise in December 2018. Since then, the tower has patiently awaited a makeover.

For parishioners, its time has finally come, and the Historic Tower Memorial Gardens project is underway.

The beautification project will be a place of contemplation and prayer as well as a tribute to the rich history of the parish. Current renderings include landscaping, a St. Joseph Grotto, a walking rosary garden, meditative Stations of the Cross, a custom-designed crucifix, a safety wall and signage along the busy corridor of Highway 412.

The historic tower serves as a focal point in the plans.

"Since December, we have been presenting parishioners with three different levels of giving for the current construction project," committee chairman Mary Wyandt-Hiebert said. "These different levels of gold, silver and bronze represent what the project could include or not

include. Pricing differences would be indicated by use of more economical materials or sizes of plants at installation time," she explained.

To date, parishioners have raised \$125,712, with another \$65,000 in pledges. The top-tier gold level will cost \$371,338 with all of the elements in the design submitted by Greg Bland of Landform Designs. Parishioners are being asked to make their pledges no later than March 31 so the project can begin as soon as possible.

"We would like to see the Historic Tower and Memorial Gardens completed by the end of the year," said pastor Father Arokiasamy "Samy" Madhichetty Irudayaraj.

Completing the project this year would be significant, said Father Madhichetty, since it is the 125th anniversary of the parish's Tontitown Grape Festival and the 30th anniversary of the current church.

The project proposal has been planned since 2019, but the pandemic delayed construction, with building resources and laborers in short supply. City improvements with utilities and widening of nearby Barrington Road adjacent to the church also took precedence before a groundbreaking or landscaping.

Despite the delays, some much-needed improvements have been made on the 80-year-old tower. Age and weather damage necessitated filling in cracks, painting and sealing it and installing new louvers, door and a new cross for the top of the tower. The cement stairs were repaired, and custom railing and ironwork were placed along the stairs and in the arch window.

Wyandt-Hiebert said the ironwork for the stairs and window were designed by Black Flag Fabrications and tell a story of the parish's roots of Catholicism with a chalice.

"But stems of grapes are also representative of the Italian immigrants being grape farmers in the area," she said. "People are very excited about what they are seeing, our presentations have been well received and there is a lot of excitement for the project. Whether you are a member of St. Joe's or not, those who want to support the project, or those who believe in preserving history and supporting the beginnings of Catholicism in the area, can contribute."

Father Madhichetty added, "I see this as being like a sanctuary of northwest Arkansas. This is where Father (Pietro) Bandini came with the Italian immigrants and built a church. It was the starting point for Catholicism in the area and it will be a great addition to the community."