

## NEWS

# Nonprofit receives overwhelming support in building new Warner community center



by Emilia Wisniewski  
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The former church on 17 Church Street in Warner will become a community center. Credit: Emilia Wisniewski / Monitor



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Katharine Nevins walked into a building full of sawdust, paint buckets and power tools, and she was awestruck.

Excavators and bulldozers whirled outside, taking up the view in the building's long windows. Inside, a room being converted into an activity space had just received a fresh coat of white paint and had its original light fixtures restored.

Since 2020, Katharine and her husband, Neil Nevins, have envisioned a gathering space in Warner for residents and visitors of all ages. Construction at the former First Baptist Church building began in the spring, and the Nevins's vision is quickly coming together.

"It's a renewable home that can be used in many possible ways over the years," Katharine said.

Their nonprofit, MainStreet Warner, hopes to create a community room designed for meetings, classes and events. Attached to the meeting room will be a full sized kitchen with a walk-in freezer intended to accommodate fresh produce and meal donations from local farms, according to Neil, who is the president of the organization's board of directors.

In a spacious hall that once held church services, the nonprofit wants to hold regular performances and concerts. A working organ and colorful stained glass windows that were a part of the building for over 100 years will stay intact with some much needed updates.

Katharine said she is most excited to have the children of Simonds School be fully engaged with the center, as the school building is located just behind the community center.

"I love the idea of the connection with the school and the children being able to come down and have a performance area or to practice or to have lessons," she said. "I envision that lovely



relationship with the school just expanding in a safe place for children to come.”

She and her husband opened a book store in 1997 that quickly became a literary haven for local children and families. They knew they could expand Warner’s sense of community by offering different programming, and in 2000, they founded MainStreet Warner with Katharine’s brother and long-time WBZ radio host Jim Mitchell.

The group has been fundamental to shaping Warner: They held Friday night activities in their book store, built an outdoor stage for summer concerts and grew a small community park honoring Mitchell after his passing in 2008, an outdoor space that happens to encompass the oldest Mulberry tree in New Hampshire.

“While the bookstore brings people together, really it’s all about creating the structure for people to to come together and how important that is,” Neil said. “We felt a need to be able to expand on that idea, and so establishing a nonprofit was really the way to go.”



From left to right, Tom Heise, Katharine Nevins and Neil Nevins are helping repurpose the building on 17 Church Street through their organization MainStreet Warner. Credit: Emilia Wisniewski / Monitor staff

The building on 17 Church Street was originally Warner's First Baptist Church, erected in 1833. The church always had a small congregation, but when the town's population began rapidly declining in the early 20th century, it became hard to sustain their meager numbers.

In 1964, the church sold the building to the Masons of Harris Lodge, who used it as a meeting place for the local Freemasons chapter. Their numbers also started to dwindle, and in 2020, MainStreet Warner bought the property.

"I think it will allow us to do all the things that we have traditionally done, better," said Tom Heise, one of the nonprofit's board members. "It will give us a year-round venue, instead of depending on a nice day for concert here in the park."

MainStreet Warner has received many donations and over \$500,000 in grants to fund the project, including \$200,000 from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, \$41,000 from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and, most recently, \$10,000 from Sugar River Bank.

President and CEO Mark Pitkin said the bank is proud to support the project, which aligns with its goal of strengthening communities it serves.

"Supporting this initiative reflects our belief in the power of community investment — not just financially, but in fostering connections, inspiration and growth," Pitkin said. "We see this project as an important step in building a vibrant and resilient Warner, and we are honored to be part of it."

Donations and gifts from Warner residents have totaled \$55,000 so far; one resident even donated a design for the building's architectural plans.

Locals have always supported the nonprofit's projects, board members said, and this time was no different.

"Warner is turning out like it's always turned out," Heise said. "People are lending a hand, because that's what people in Warner do."

The meeting room and kitchen are expected to open to the public in late fall, according to Neil. The performance venue will require at least a year and another \$250,000 to open.



Neil said he believes Warner residents helping fund this projects — to “give their gifts back to the community” — have shown they can build enough togetherness to solve other issues the town faces.

“People’s fears and frustrations, they can work through in a way that changes that fear into into hope and the confidence that community can come together to successfully resolve it,” he said.