



C H A T H A M C O U N T Y - S A V A N N A H

METROPOLITAN PLANNING COMMISSION

"Planning the Future - Respecting the Past"

STAFF REPORT

To: The Planning Commission
Through: Melanie Wilson, Executive Director and CEO
From: Ken Gorski, Senior Planner - Development Services
Date: January 16th, 2026
Subject: Variance for Development Plan

Owner: First African Church of Woodville

Address: 21 Alfred St

PIN(s): 20628 02015 & 20628 02014

Site Area: 0.60 acres total

Alderman District: 1 – Bernetta Lanier

Chatham County Commission District: 8 – Marsha Buford

File Number: 25-006080-ZA

Request

The Petitioner is requesting MPC approval for variances to the front and rear setback requirements of the RSF-6 zoning district to accommodate an addition to the building footprint of an existing legal nonconforming place of worship and the addition of a parking lot with two new curb cuts.

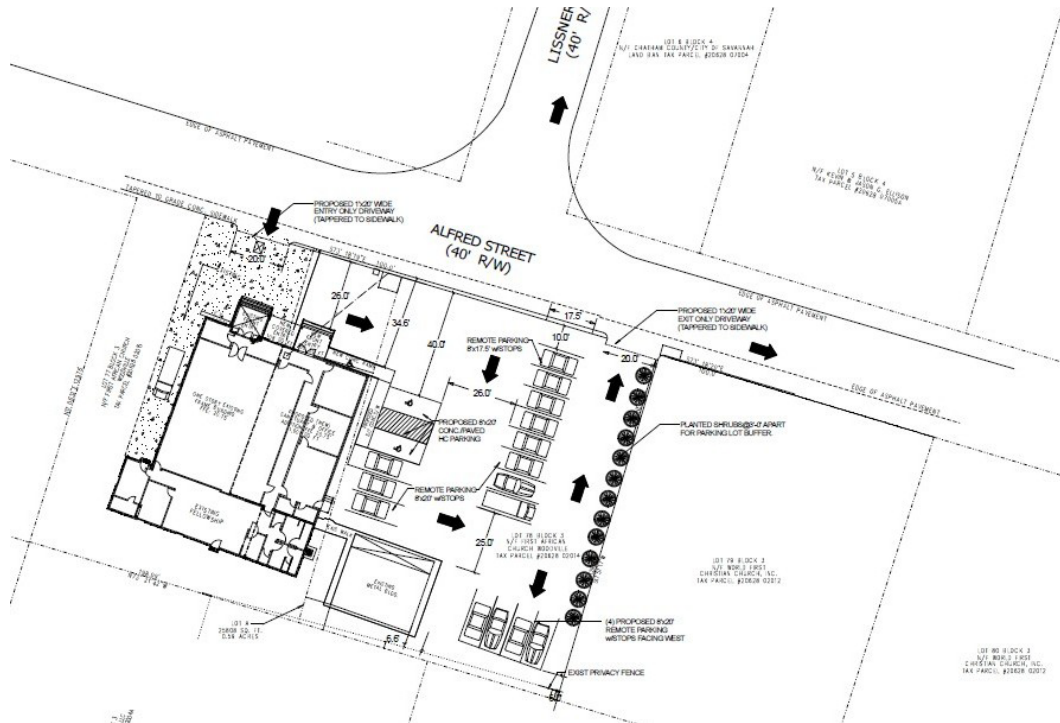
The requests are as follows:

1. Reduce the front setback by 7'-10" (30 feet to 22 feet)
2. Reduce the rear setback by 38' (from 50 feet to 12 feet).

The building addition is to increase the size of the sanctuary, create new offices and support spaces, and enlarge the front covered entrance. The proposed parking lot will create a formal parking area in lieu of the existing grass lot and include new ADA accessible spaces and a new accessible ramp to the expanded front entrance.

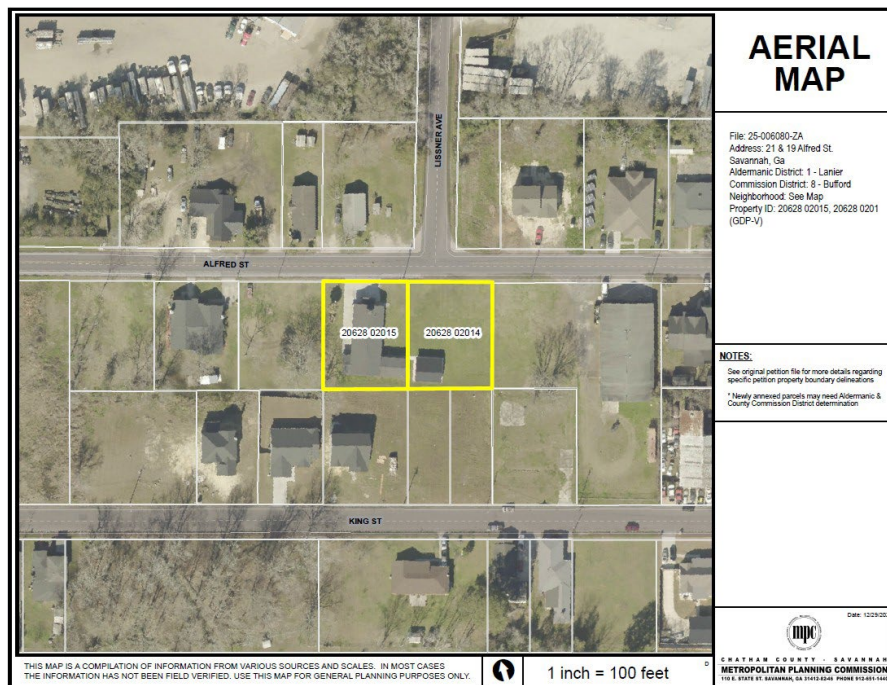
Facts and Findings

- 1) The two parcels, according to the Chatham County Tax Assessor's records, are approximately 0.30 acres each for a combined total of 0.60 acres (26,700 square feet) in size. It is a 200' by 133.5' rectangle fronting on Alfred Street at the intersection of Lissner Avenue.
- 2) The property is zoned as RSF-6 and the church facility is an allowable non-conforming use that predates the Zoning Ordinance. The two lots have recently been combined and are in the process of being recorded (25-000861-SUBP).
- 3) The setback requirements for permitted nonresidential uses are 30-ft front and 20-ft side per *Section 5.7.6* and a 50' setback from any residential property required for a place of worship per *Section 8.3.15*. For this property, the side setback to the west and the rear setback to the south abut a residential property, requiring 50' setbacks at those locations.
- 4) The site is currently developed with a 2,896 square foot church building and a 660 square foot accessory structure constructed in 2020. It should be noted that the square footage from the County Property Record Card for the church structure does not include the front entry porch or a previous restroom addition to the side of the fellowship hall. The existing building is nonconforming since it encroaches upon the 30-foot front setback and the 50-foot rear setback.
- 5) The applicant proposes adding 1,901 square feet to the existing structure to expand the sanctuary and add office/support areas and enlarge the front entry porch by 208 square feet.
- 6) The expanded front entry porch will be connected to a new parking lot with a new ADA accessible ramp. The applicant has not provided the seating capacity for the sanctuary from which to determine the parking required. Based on the proposed parking space count of 17, the new capacity of the enlarged sanctuary would be 102 people. An additional variance for parking capacity could be required if the proposed sanctuary seating is greater than 102 or if they exceed this number in the future.
- 7) Per Zoning Ordinance Section 9.3.5, places of worship are permitted to use "alternative surfacing requirements" to satisfy their parking requirements. This allows for a portion or all of the parking areas to use alternate materials, concrete or asphalt paving is not specifically required.



Proposed Site Plan

World First Christian Church is on the neighboring lots to the east and Church of Christ Holiness is on the east end of the block, both indicated by orange arrows. The other surrounding parcels are either vacant or contain single family homes.



Aerial Zoning Map with Imagery

Public Notice

Mailed notice of the Planning Commission meeting was sent to all property owners within 300-feet of the subject property, signs were posted on site and required newspaper advertisements were run at least 15 days prior to the meeting. The mailed notice included instructions on how to access the public meeting via the internet.

Standards at Issue

1. Per Section 5.7.6 of the Zoning Ordinance, this property within the RSF-6 zoning district has a 30-foot front setback. The existing front entry porch already encroaches into the front setback, and the extension of that porch will do the same. The existing structure also encroaches upon the 50-foot separation from residential property at the rear which also requires setback relief to become compliant.

5.7.6 Development Standards for Permitted Nonresidential Uses							
Standards	RSF-E	RSF-30	RSF-20	RSF-10	RSF-6	RSF-5	RSF-4
Lot area (min sq ft) [1]	43,560	30,000	20,000	20,000	20,000	20,000	20,000
Lot width (min ft)	120	100	100	100	100	100	100
Building Setbacks (min ft)							
Front yard	40	30	30	30	30	30	30
Side (interior) yard	20	20	20	20	20	20	20
Side (street) yard	20	20	20	20	20	20	20
Rear yard	40	30	30	30	30	30	30
From access easement	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
Building Separation	See Fire Code	See Fire Code	See Fire Code	See Fire Code	See Fire Code	See Fire Code	See Fire Code
Building Coverage (max)	40%	40%	40%	40%	40%	40%	40%
Height (max ft)	40	40	40	40	36	36	36
Accessory Structure Setbacks	See Sec. 8.7	See Sec. 8.7	See Sec. 8.7	See Sec. 8.7	See Sec. 8.7	See Sec. 8.7	See Sec. 8.7
Parking Area Setback (min ft)							
From collector or arterial street rights-of-way	15	15	15	15	15	15	15
From local street rights-of-way	10	10	10	10	10	10	10
Abutting lane, property line or access easement	5	5	5	5	5	5	5

[1] Where a nonresidential use is proposed to be served by private water and/or sewer, additional lot area and/or setbacks may be required by the Chatham County Health Department.

Sec. 8.3 Civic Use Standards for Limited and Special Uses

The following use standards shall apply to limited and special uses, as set forth in [Sec. 5.4, Principal Use Table](#).

8.3.15 Place of Worship

The following use conditions do not apply within the TN-2 zoning district:

- a. Such use shall be located on a street classified as a collector or arterial as identified in [Appendix A-1](#) unless a special use permit is approved subject to [Sec. 3.10](#) to allow such use on any other street classification.
- b. Any building shall be set back at least 50 feet from any residential property.

2. The site plan shows a new parking lot and vehicle circulation pattern with two new proposed curb cuts. The new curb cuts may be problematic due to their proximity to the

intersection of Alfred Street and Lissner Avenue. This parking lot layout, curb cuts, circulation pattern, and any related variances shall be subject and conditional to review and approval by Traffic Engineering.

3. The site plan shows a planted parking lot buffer along the eastern side property line. Per Table 5.7.6 this planting buffer must be at least 5' wide to meet code requirements. Otherwise, the parking lot appears to comply with the design standards of Table 9.3-2.
4. Parking capacity requirements are determined based upon the number of seats in the church sanctuary: 1 space per 6 seats. The proposed seating capacity is not provided in the application or supporting documents. Reverse-engineering the seating capacity based on the 17 parking spaces shown on the site plan, the allowable capacity of the sanctuary per code would be 102 seats. If the actual capacity is 102 people or less, then the proposed parking lot will comply with zoning code. If the proposed capacity of the sanctuary is greater than 102 people, then the parking capacity would have to increase accordingly or a variance would be needed for parking capacity relief.

Table 9.3-1 Minimum Space Requirements		
Hospital	1 per 2 beds + 1 per employee	5% of vehicle parking
Other Civic Uses		
Place of worship	1 per 6 seats in sanctuary	2% of vehicle parking

Zoning Ordinance Review

The Planning Commission is authorized to grant variances to the standards of *Article 5, Base Zoning Districts*, upon the basis of the criteria established in Sec. 3.21.10.

The following review criteria for Variances are prescribed in the Savannah Zoning Ordinance Sec. 3.21.10:

A. General Consistency

The variance shall be consistent with the intent of this Ordinance and the Comprehensive Plan and shall not be injurious to the neighborhood or otherwise detrimental to the public health, safety, or welfare.

MPC Comment: The church has a long-standing presence within the community and this expansion does not alter the established development pattern. The existing structure already encroaches into the front and rear setbacks, so these additions will not create a novel encroachment condition.

B. Special Conditions

i. Special conditions and/or circumstances exist which are peculiar to the land, buildings or structures involved and which are not applicable to other lands, buildings or structures in the same zoning district.

MPC Comment: Special conditions exist regarding the placement of the existing 1955 structure. The hardship is structural rather than land-based; strictly enforcing the setback on the addition while the main structure sits forward would result in a disjointed design. The location of the subject property across from an intersection

of two roads might require additional design attention in relation to curb cut and access locations.

ii. The special conditions and/or circumstances do not result from the actions of the applicant.

MPC Comment: The first special condition is the result of the historic placement of the building. The second special condition is subject to review and approval by Traffic Engineering and may require layout and curb cut revisions. Any required changes should not rise to a level that would cause hardship or impede the use of the property.

iii. The special conditions and/or circumstances are not purely financial in nature so as to allow the applicant to use the land, buildings or structures involved more profitably or to save money.

MPC Comment: The special conditions are not purely financial in nature but necessary for the reasonable expansion and modernization of the facility, including but not limited to typical ADA accommodations. Concerns from Traffic Engineering may require additional analysis and design considerations, but should not cause significant financial impact or impede the use of the property.

C. Literal Interpretation

Literal interpretation of the provisions of the regulations would deprive the applicant of rights commonly enjoyed by other properties in the same zoning district under the terms of the Ordinance and would result in unnecessary and undue hardship on the applicant.

MPC Comment: Literal interpretation would complicate the design and structure of the addition to the facility and impede the installation of necessary accessible ramps and parking.

D. Minimum Variance

The variance, if granted, is the minimum variance necessary to make possible the reasonable use of land, buildings, or structures.

MPC Comment: The variance is required to allow relief based on the existing nonconformity at the front and rear setbacks. The variance shall be the least amount required to bring the property into general compliance.

E. Special Privilege Not Granted

The variance would not confer on the applicant any special privilege that is denied by this Ordinance to other lands, buildings, or structures in the same zoning district.

MPC Comment: The variance will not confer applicant a special privilege.

Staff Recommendation

MPC Staff recommends **approval** of the requested two (2) variances:

1. Reduce the front setback from 30-foot to 22-foot.
2. Reduce the rear setback from 50-foot to 12-foot.

With the following conditions:

- A. A continuous privacy fence at least 6 feet in height be established along the rear property line.
- B. No parking in the rear as no additional impact should be made.