

BANGOR DAILY NEWS

Repairs under way on historic Bangor steeple



Kevin Bennett | BDN

A worker stretches to reach a hook on a crane while working on the historic Hammond Street Congregational Church on Thursday, June 2, 2011. The church steeple, which houses a Verizon cell antenna, is having major repairs done on it. The church is also looking to raise money to make the rear of the building and the Arthur Little Building handicap accessible. *Buy Photo*

By **Nok-Noi Ricker**, BDN Staff
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BANGOR, Maine — Snow and rain over the last 178 years has done its damage to the Hammond Street Congregational Church steeple, which towers some 250 feet above Main Street, and is in desperate need to repair.

“The weather is starting to enter the belfry,” Brad Ryder, chairman of the church’s board of trustees said Friday. “It’s going to take more than a Band-Aid” to fix.

Scaffolding was recently erected around the base of the approximately 40-foot steeple and work is under way to repair the water damage to the top of the historic church, which has played an important community role for nearly two centuries, Ryder said.

“The church was built in 1833 and it’s always been an icon of [Bangor](#),” he said. “It’s one of the tallest steeples and has been a regional landmark for a long, long time.”

Nickerson & O’Day of Brewer has been hired to do the restoration work, which is estimated to cost around \$250,000, and the Maine Community Foundation has chipped in a \$40,000 Maine Steeples Project grant to help fund the project.

The Hammond Street Congregational Church was the Queen City’s fifth house of worship, according to historic newspaper accounts, and was constructed on Patten’s Garden opposite Gun House Hill. Construction was financed by selling pews, while expenses were financed with a yearly pew tax until 1916 when expenditures were raised by pew rentals and weekly offerings.

Now, the church rents out the steeple to a cell phone company to help offset maintenance costs, said church member Ben Haskell.

“The public may not know that the steeple plays an important role in any downtown Bangor Verizon cell phone users; there’s a Verizon antenna system ‘hidden’ in the steeple,” he said in a recent email.

The church steeple became a cell phone tower five years ago and church trustees recently signed a new contract with the telecommunications giant to rent out the bell tower section of the steeple, just above the clock, said Ryder, who also is the owner of Epic Sports.

“You can’t actually see the antennas. They are actually concealed within the steeple,” he said. Because the church was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1982 and is a historic landmark, “the materials had to look like what had to be up there for the last 173 years,” when installed five years ago, Ryder said.

Around eight antennae sit within the four-windowed chamber, nearly 100 feet from the ground, and supporting equipment is located in the church basement.

Using church steeples and flagpoles is common for cell phone companies, U.S. Cellular spokeswoman Kelly Cioe, who works for Whalen Public & Media Relations, said on Friday. In fact the flagpole on top of the Bangor Water Tower is a cell tower, according to previous [Bangor Daily News](#) articles.

The Hammond Street Congregational Church, which is home to the ecumenical food cupboard and a number of outreach programs, has been a vital part of the community for nearly two centuries and is tied to numerous historic events. Because the church steeple is so tall, the Stars and Stripes were flown from atop the clock tower in 1898 to signal the end of the four-month Spanish-American War, and in the early 1900s, the city placed a fire alarm system in the belfry.

“It hasn’t been used in 50 years or so,” Ryder said.

The church is the end point for the annual Hike for the Homeless and hosts numerous other community events, he said.

In addition to repairing and restoring the steeple, the church renovation plans also include adding disability lifts to make all levels of the building handicap accessible (\$75,000), painting the inside of the church, which has not happened since the 1960s (\$15,000), and improving a sewer line (\$15,000), Ryder said.

The cost of all four projects is around \$355,000.

“We’ve raised about half of the cost of the project” through very generous church members, said Ryder, and are working to raise the remainder of the funds through community donations.

“We really think it is a community benefit,” he said of the project.

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