

Congregational Church steeple reconstruction rises over West Hartford





Scaffolding is being put in place around the steeple at First Church West Hartford in the center of town on May 22. Aaron Flaum/Hartford Courant

BY STEVE SMITH HARTFORD COURANT

The steeple at the First Church of Christ, West Hartford Congregational, has been a South Main Street landmark since it was first erected about 75 years ago.

But while it was receiving a routine fresh coat of paint earlier this year, the painter noticed some deficiencies in the structure of the steeple. Bob Cave, a member of the church and the buildings and grounds committee, said he was told by the painting contractor that the steeple would need a “total overhaul.”

That prompted a repair effort that is now nearly complete.

“What’s amazing is that it was built during the war,” Cave said. “I don’t know where they got the steel for the inside of the steeple. The exterior had deteriorated but the interior is fine. Some water had gotten in, but a lot of the columns had rotted.” Courtland Lewis, chair of the building and grounds committee, said the church meetinghouse was built in the 1940s, and footage of its original construction still exists. It was actually the fifth meetinghouse for the church, which dates back more than 300 years. An assessment of needs throughout the building was done last year.

“It turns out that when you’ve got 50,000 square feet built 80 years ago, there are things going on,” Lewis said. “The steeple is the most obvious and apparent one. We’ve got some other work to do, as well.”

Valley Restoration, based in Torrington, is the contractor for the project.

Some polyvinyl chloride (PVC) is replacing some of the original woodwork, in hope of adding to the steeple's life, before the next restoration is needed.

Lewis said, despite a fear of heights, he climbed up the scaffolds to see the parts being replaced.

"It's amazing when you get up close and personal. The original craftsmanship and design is really pretty cool," he said.

The quote for the rehab was \$400,000, and a fundraising committee was set up. Multiple local businesses donated funds and/or services to aid the project. Many donated items or gift cards, which are being raffled on a weekly basis, to raise funds. Lewis said the goal is to raise at least 10% of the price tag, and the rest will come from an endowment the church has maintained since 1885.

The reconstruction, which began in May, is expected to be complete by mid-September. A page on the church's website has been devoted to the fundraising and provides updates, via video, on the progress of the work.

The steeple contains 40 carillon — bells played by a keyboard — a fan and about 5,000 tubes for the church's pipe organ, and several large chimes.

"It's got three musical instruments in it, that steeple," Cave said.

Church member Terry Schmidt also built a miniature replica about three feet tall, of the steeple, that is featured when the raffles are drawn. "He did it with leftover stuff around the house," Cave said. "That's the kind of thing that went into the effort of this fundraising."

As the scaffolding has started to come down, a Chi Rho (early symbol for Christ), which is now gold-leafed, is visible.

"You can see it throughout the whole town of West Hartford," Cave said. "It's absolutely beautiful. Part of why we did this is the steeple is an icon for West Hartford."

"The Chi Rho as been regilded and the guys have been working on down," Lewis said. "We're hoping to be finished up in the next 3-4 weeks and have it really shine."

A celebration is being planned for September when the rehabilitation of the steeple will be completed.

“People will be able to put a smile on their face, knowing that it’s all set for hopefully another 80 years,” Cave said.