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July 22, 2022

## BY EMAIL ONLY

Planning and Zoning Division City of Hartford 260 Constitution Plaza, 1st Floor Hartford, CT 06103

Re: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a Utah corporation sole ("Church); Text Amendment and Special Permit Application for 2035 Broad Street (the "Property")

Dear Madam Chair and Members of the Planning and Zoning Commission,

During the July 12, 2022 regularly scheduled Planning and Zoning Commission meeting, several members of the Commission and members of the public expressed apprehension about the proposed text amendment, and more specifically, communicated the following concerns: (1) the proposed text amendment was too broad; (2) the proposed text amendment would potentially reduce Hartford's grand list; (3) whether preservation of the grand list constitutes a "compelling interest"; and (4) whether the existing regulation imposes a "substantial burden" on the exercise of religion.

In response to comments made by Commissioners and members of the public, and in further support of the application for a text change, we submit the following materials:

- 1. Revised text amendment to section 3.3.2.A(3)(c), narrowing the proposed amendment to only require a minimum lot size of 0.5 acres for houses of worship in all other districts.
- 2. Letter from Gregory and Adams, dated July 22, 2022, explaining the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act, 42 U.S.C. § 2000cc *et seq.*, and illustrating how courts have interpreted the phrases "substantial burden" and "compelling government interest."
- 3. Hartford Tax Assessor Property Card for 614 Maple Avenue, the location of the existing Meetinghouse.
- 4. Hartford Tax Assessor Property Card for 2035 Broad Street, the location of the proposed Meetinghouse.

We look forward to making a presentation at the next hearing in some detail on this additional information. We thank you for your time and consideration.

Very truly yours, GREGORY AND ADAMS, P.C.

By:

James D'Alton Murphy

James D'Alton Murphy

### Enclosures

cc:

Aimee Chambers, Director, Hartford Planning Department

Paul Ashworth, Senior Planner, Hartford Planning Department

Richard Vassallo, Esq., Corporation Counsel for the City of Hartford

Douglas Matsumori, Esq., Office of General Counsel, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

James Ellsworth, Esq., Kirton and McConkie

David Scott, Project Development & Construction Manager

Michael Marcheschi, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

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# **Proposed Text Amendment**

# Reduce Minimum Lot Area Requirement for Houses of Worship

## 3.3.2.A Assembly (p. 72)

(3) When noted as subject to conditions . . . or requires a special permit . . . in Figure 3.2-A Table of Principal Uses, the following regulations apply:

\*\*\*

(c) Minimum Lot Area. The following minimum lot areas for all assembly uses, exclusive of any other uses on the same lot, are required: 5 acres in the N-1 district, 4 acres in all other NX and N districts, and 3 acres in every other district, except for houses of worship, which require a minimum of 0.5 acres, and except in the DT districts, where there is no minimum acreage required for Assembly uses.

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Ms. Josye Utick Planning and Zoning Division City of Hartford Department of Development Services 550 Main Street Hartford, CT 06103

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, a Utah corporation sole ("Church"); Re: Text Amendment and Special Permit Applications – 2035 Broad Street (Zoned MS-2)

Dear Madam Chair and Members of the Commission,

As a continuation of the discussion with City Planning and Zoning Commissioners at the July 12<sup>th</sup> public hearing, we write to provide additional information about the legal test under RLUIPA and Connecticut's own counterpart statute that would be implicated by the facts and circumstances surrounding a denial by Hartford City of the Church's applications to lease a new property for a house of worship within Hartford. First, Hartford City cannot lawfully discriminate to exclude on the basis of religion. See 42 U.S. Code § 2000cc(b). Second, Hartford City cannot lawfully impose a "substantial burden" on religious exercise unless Hartford demonstrates that imposing the burden "(A) is in furtherance of a compelling governmental interest; and (B) is the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling governmental interest." Id. § 2000cc(a).

## 1. Federal and Connecticut law treats discrimination against religion the same as discrimination against other protected classes.

Certainly, Hartford would not base its decision to allow a group of people from establishing a physical presence within its borders on that group's gender, race, national origin, or disability. Yet both the U.S. Supreme Court and Connecticut's Supreme Court place "religion" in the same sphere of protected status as gender, race, national origin, and other protected categories. See e.g., Turner v. Boyle, 116 F. Supp. 3d 58, 95 (D. Conn. 2015) ("Case law recognizes a limited number of protected class categories ... based on an individual's race, national origin, religion, or gender."); Plyler v. Doe, 457 U.S. 202, 216-17 (1982) ("Thus

we have treated as presumptively invidious those classifications that disadvantage a 'suspect class,' or that impinge upon the exercise of a 'fundamental right.' " (citations omitted)); *Anthony A. v. Comm'r of Correction*, 339 Conn. 290, 322, 260 A.3d 1199, 1219 (2021) ("policies that impair a fundamental constitutional right or target a suspect class require that this court apply strict scrutiny to determine whether the policy passes constitutional muster." (cleaned up)).

Indeed, the Connecticut Constitution specifically prohibits discrimination on the basis of religion the same as other types of discrimination. It declares: "No person shall be denied the equal protection of the law nor be subjected to segregation or discrimination in the exercise or enjoyment of his or her civil or political rights because of religion, race, color, ancestry, national origin, sex or physical or mental disability." Connecticut Constitution art. I, § 20. Accordingly, because the present zoning regulation excludes new religious groups from coming into Hartford unless they can satisfy an arbitrarily-established three-acre parcel size parameter, it is discriminatory, unlawful, and imposes a substantial burden on the freedom of religious exercise.

Moreover, RLUIPA mandates that "No government shall impose or implement a <u>land use regulation</u> that—(A) totally *excludes* religious assemblies from a jurisdiction; or (B) *unreasonably limits* religious assemblies, institutions, or structures within a jurisdiction." RLUIPA, 42 U.S.C. § 2000cc(b)(3) (emphasis added). The effect of the existing Hartford requirement is unlawful in that it excludes and unreasonably limits religious assemblies from Hartford.

The congregants' ability to travel additional bus stops does not negate the substantial burden imposed by Hartford's zoning regulation in excluding the Church from Hartford. During the July 12<sup>th</sup> hearing, questions were raised as to how congregants could claim a substantial burden if they could travel a few additional bus stops to travel outside the city limits to a neighboring town to attend Church services. For Hartford to uphold a zoning ordinance on that basis, however, is to outright exclude the Church from religious worship within Hartford City altogether. As discussed above, under federal and Connecticut state law, that would amount to discrimination similar to excluding a group on the basis of its gender, race, national origin, or disability.

2. RLUIPA prohibits Hartford City from imposing a substantial burden on religious exercise unless there is a compelling governmental interest and the means imposed is in furtherance of the compelling governmental interest and is the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling governmental interest.

Under RLUIPA, once the Church shows that "a land use regulation ... imposes a substantial burden on the religious exercise" of its congregants, the burden of proof *shifts to Hartford* to demonstrate that the regulation: "(1) was in furtherance of a compelling governmental interest; and (2) was the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling governmental interest." *Holt v. Hobbs*, 574 U.S. 352, 362 (2015) (alterations omitted) (quoting RLUIPA, 42 U.S.C. § 2000cc–1(a)).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> In this regard, without limitation, and in addition to the information provided herein, the following information and context is provided for the City's consideration:

<sup>1.</sup> The Church's real estate broker has searched for an appropriate leased space since March of 2020. During this period of over two years, the ground floor at 2035 Broad Street (the "Property") was the only leased space found that meets the Church's needs for worship in the local community, including without limitation that the meetinghouse serves the innercity congregants and is along a bus route.

### Substantial Burden

Courts recognize several ways that a zoning regulation imposes a "substantial burden" on religious liberties. The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, which oversees the federal courts in Connecticut, explained that "when the town's actions are arbitrary, capricious, [or] unlawful ... a substantial burden may be imposed because it appears that the applicant may have been discriminated against on the basis of its status as a religious institution." *Fortress Bible Church v. Feiner*, 694 F.3d 208, 219 (2d. Cir. 2012). A land use decision can also impose a substantial burden *even if* the zoning scheme itself is "facially neutral and generally applicable." *Int'l Church of Foursquare Gospel v. City of San Leandro*, 673 F.3d 1059, 1066-67 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2011), *cert. denied*, 132 S. Ct. 251 (2011) (internal citations omitted). That is, a substantial burden arises even where a municipal decision merely "has the *effect* of depriving ... religious institutions or assemblies of *reasonable opportunities* to practice their religion, including the use and construction of structures" or where a religious institution "has no ready alternatives, or where the alternatives require substantial delay, uncertainty, and expense."

Likewise, many courts, including the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit, have found that mere delay, uncertainty, and expense in the zoning application or reapplication process amounts to a substantial burden. See, e.g., Westchester Day Sch. v. Vill. of Mamaroneck, 504 F.3d 338, 349 (2d Cir. 2007); Reaching Hearts Int'l, Inc. v. Prince George's County, 584 F. Supp. 2d 766, 786 (D. Md. 2008) (reapplication process that required "expenditure of substantial funds and resulted in delay and uncertainty" "qualify as a substantial burden under RLUIPA"); Sts. Constantine & Helen Greek Orthodox Church, Inc. v. City of New Berlin, 396 F.3d 895, 901 (7th Cir. 2005) ("The burden here was substantial. The Church could have searched around for other parcels of land ... or it could have continued filing applications with the City, but in either case there would have been delay, uncertainty, and expense.")

Importantly, a substantial burden need not affect a "central" belief or practice of the religion. In fact, it is unconstitutional for a municipality to question "the centrality of particular beliefs or practices to a faith, or the validity of particular litigants' interpretations of those creeds." *Employment Div., Dep't of Human Res. of Oregon v. Smith*, 494 U.S. 872, 887 (1990). What is more, RLUIPA defines "religious exercise" broadly to mean "any exercise of religion, *whether or not* compelled by, or central to, a system of religious belief," and expressly includes the "use, building, or conversion of real property for the purpose of religious exercise." 42 U.S.C. § 2000cc-5(7). "Because use of land *is* 'religious exercise' under RLUIPA, there can be no doubt that the City's action denying use of the Subject Property is a 'substantial burden' on that use." *Elsinore Christian Ctr. v. City of Lake Elsinore*, 291 F. Supp. 2d 1083, 1091 (C.D. Cal. 2003), *rev'd on other grounds*, 197 F. App'x 718 (9th Cir. 2006) (emphasis in original). Therefore, even a zoning ordinance's impact on a religious institution's ability to lease "a physical space adequate to their needs and consistent

<sup>2.</sup> Although the Church is tax-exempt, its locating at the Property at issue does not create any new or additional tax-exempt status for the City. In fact, under the new lease, the Church would indirectly pay property taxes in the form of rent and the landlord's CAM fees.

<sup>3.</sup> Requiring a religious tax-exempt entity to take up three acres of land within Hartford may be more harmful to the City's tax base than it would be to free up the vast majority of that same land for other commercial uses. For example, if the Church uses 0.5 acres instead of 3 acres, that would leave 2.5 acres for taxable uses.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Rocky Mountain Christian Church v. Board of Cnty. Com'rs of Boulder Cnty., 612 F. Supp. 2d 1163, 1172 (D. Colo. March 30, 2009) aff'd, 613 F.3d 1229 (10<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2010), cert. denied, 131 S. Ct. 978 (2011) (emphasis added).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> See Westchester Day Sch. v. Vill. of Mamaroneck, 504 F.3d 338, 349 (2d Cir. 2007) (internal quotation marks omitted); see also Harbor Missionary Church Corp. v. City of San Buenaventura, 642 F. App'x 726, 729–30 (9th Cir. 2016).

with their theological requirements" creates a substantial burden "at the heart of the RLUIPA land-use provisions." *Church of Hills of Twp. of Bedminster v. Twp. of Bedminster*, 2006 WL 462674, at \*5 (D.N.J. Feb. 24, 2006) (quoting 146 Cong. Rec. S7774-01, 7774 (daily ed. July 27, 2000) (Joint Statement of Sen. Hatch and Sen. Kennedy on RLUIPA)) (emphasis added). Thus, preventing or making it unreasonably difficult to lease or build a house of worship or otherwise limiting religious worship have all been held to be "substantial burdens."

The exact location of congregants is not relevant to the substantial burden here. During the July 12<sup>th</sup> hearing, there were also questions about the specific area where Church congregants resided *within* Hartford to justify or reject the proposed location. However, the exact location of congregants within Hartford becomes irrelevant when Hartford (1) has excluded its resident congregants from leasing a suitable space within Hartford, and (2) has imposed a substantial burden on their religious exercise throughout the entire City. That said, there might be circumstances where the residence of congregants might inform the existence of a substantial burden if there were one particular zone within Hartford at issue that imposed a substantial burden. But that is not the case here. The three-acre minimum lot size is very broadly applicable throughout the city.

## **Compelling Governmental Interest**

Normally, a municipality need only justify its decisions with some "rational basis." But when a city's decision conflicts with religious liberties, courts apply the heightened "strict scrutiny" standard, which requires the municipality to show that the zoning restriction: "(1) was in furtherance of a compelling governmental interest; and (2) was the least restrictive means of furthering that compelling governmental interest." *Holt v. Hobbs*, 574 U.S. 352, 362 (2015) (alterations omitted) (quoting RLUIPA, 42 U.S.C. § 2000cc–1(a)).

The "compelling interest" standard is the strictest possible judicial standard, and laws subjected to this test "will survive ... only in rare cases." *Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye, Inc. v. City of Hialeah*, 508 U.S. 520, 580 (1993). That is, "a law restrictive of religious practice must advance interests of the highest order" because "only those interests of the highest order and those not otherwise served can overbalance legitimate claims to the free exercise of religion." *Id.* at 546 (1993); *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, 406 U.S. 205, 215 (1972). "Only the gravest abuses, endangering paramount interests, give occasion for permissible limitation" on religious liberties. *Sherbert v. Verner*, 374 U.S. 398, 406 (1963).

Several legitimate governmental interests do not amount to *compelling* interests when pitted against religious liberties,<sup>5</sup> including the preservation of the City's tax base. "[R]evenue generation is not a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Int'l Church of the Foursquare Gospel v. City of San Leandro, 673 F.3d 1059, 1067 (9<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2011), cert. denied, 132 S. Ct. 251 (2011); Fortress Bible Church v. Feiner, 694 F.3d 208, 219-220 (2d. Cir. 2012); Westchester Day Sch. v. Mamaroneck, 504 F.3d 338, 350-53 (2d Cir. 2007); Guru Nanak Sikh Soc. v. County of Sutter, 456 F.3d 978, 988 (9th Cir. 2006); Sts. Constantine & Helen Greek Orthodox Church, Inc. v. City of New Berlin, 396 F.3d 895, 899-901 (7th Cir. 2005); Reaching Hearts Int'l, Inc. v. Prince George's County, 584 F. Supp. 2d 766, 784 (D. Md. 2008), aff'd, 368 Fed. Appx. 370 (4th Cir. 2010); Grace Church v. City of San Diego, 555 F. Supp. 2d 1126, 1136-37 (S.D. Cal. 2008); Lighthouse Comty. Church of God v. City of Southfield, 2007 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 28, \*24 (E.D. Mich. Jan. 3, 2007); Mintz v. Roman Catholic Bishop, 424 F. Supp. 2d 309, 320-21 (D. Mass. 2006); Cottonwood Christian Center v. Cypress Redevelopment Agency, 218 F. Supp. 2d 1203, 1226-27 (C.D. Cal. 2002).

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> See Rocky Mountain Christian Church, 612 F. Supp.2d 1175 ("lack of harmony with the character of the neighborhood, incompatibility with the surrounding area, [and] incompatibility with the [City's] comprehensive plan," "although legitimate in many senses, do not constitute compelling governmental interests."); Mintz v. Roman Catholic Bishop, 424 F. Supp. 2d 309,

compelling state interest sufficient to justify ... a substantial burden" on religion. *Cottonwood Christian Ctr.*, 218 F.Supp.2d at 1228; *see also Jacobi v. Zoning Bd. of Adjustment of Lower Moreland Twp.*, 196 A.2d 742, 745 (Penn. 1964); *Int'l Church of Foursquare Gospel v. City of San Leandro*, 673 F.3d 1059, 1071 (9th Cir. 2011). While preserving a tax base might be viewed in some narrow circumstances as a *legitimate* concern like many other governmental pursuits, it does not rise to the level of a "compelling" interest to displace countervailing interests of constitutional rights like the First Amendment's guarantee of religious freedom.

Indeed, "if revenue generation were a compelling state interest, municipalities could exclude all religious institutions from their cities." *Id.* "This is so because religious and educational institutions are tax exempt and the land would always generate more revenue if put to a commercial or industrial use." *Id. See also Jacobi v. Zoning Bd. of Adjustment of Lower Moreland Twp.*, 413 Pa. 286, 291, 196 A.2d 742, 745 (1964) ("To say ... that such tax loss *per se* is detrimental to the general welfare, is to say that the legislature had no concern for the general welfare in providing tax exemptions for religious and educational institutions."). "So universal is the belief that religious and educational institutions should be exempt from taxation that it would be odd indeed if we were to disapprove an action of the zoning authorities consistent with such belief and label it *adverse to the general welfare*." *Id.* (emphasis added). *See also Int'l Church of Foursquare Gospel*, 673 F.3d at 1071 ("While the City may prefer to preserve the Catalina property for industrial use, the City presents no evidence that it could not achieve the same goals by using other property within its jurisdiction for that purpose," and the property in question "was on the market because it had been unable to sustain the use preferred by the City as a technology company").

Moreover, the City cannot demonstrate that the Church's relocation in Hartford harms its tax base. The Church does pay taxes in the form of rent and CAM fees to the landlord, who in turn pays property tax to the City. Keeping the first floor of the proposed lease space empty would only contribute to vacancy in the City and harm the sustainable use of the property. Additionally, the Church's move from approx. 0.5 miles down the street creates a net zero impact on the City's tax base. The Church is not creating any new tax-exempt status within the City. Therefore, if the City's interest is to drive out entities that have lawfully obtained tax-exempt status, then the denial of the Church's relocation within the City is not a means, much less the least restrictive means, of generating any net change in revenue. Critically, as set forth below, it is the City's burden to show there is no other way to generate revenue.

#### **Least Restrictive Means**

Even if Hartford City were able to establish a compelling interest reason to burden a Church's religious exercise, the City's action to protect its compelling interest must be the least restrictive means. *Cottonwood Christian Ctr. v. Cypress Redevelopment Agency*, 218 F. Supp. 2d 1203, 1229 (C.D. Cal. 2002) ("Far from doing that, the City has done the equivalent of using a sledgehammer to kill an ant.") "The least-restrictive-means standard is exceptionally demanding, and it requires the government to show that it lacks other means of achieving its desired goal without imposing a substantial burden on the exercise of religion by

<sup>323 (</sup>D. Mass. 2006) (one town's "setback and [lot] coverage requirements reveal no particularly compelling interest"); Whitton v. City of Gladstone, 54 F.3d 1400, 1408 (8th Cir. 1995) ("asserted interests in . . . aesthetics, while significant, have never been held to be compelling"); Society of Jesus v. Boston Landmarks Comm'n, 564 N.E.2d 571, 573 (Mass. 1990) ("interest in historic preservation, though worthy, is not sufficiently compelling to justify restraints on the free exercise of religion"); First Covenant Church v. Seattle, 120 Wn. 2d 203, 223 (Wash. 1992) ("We hold that the City's interest in preservation of aesthetic and historic structures is not compelling and it does not justify the infringement of [Church's] right to freely exercise religion. The possible loss of significant architectural elements is a price we must accept to guarantee the paramount right of religious freedom."); but see Schall v. Martin, 467 U.S. 253, 264 (1984) (holding that "protecting the community from crime" is a "compelling state interest.").

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the objecting party." *Holt v. Hobbs*, 574 U.S. 352, 364–65 (2015) (internal quotation marks and brackets omitted). "If a less restrictive means is available for the Government to achieve its goals, the Government must use it." *Id.* 

In *Cottonwood Christian*, the court reasoned that "the City has not demonstrated that there is no other way to provide for revenue" without preventing the building of a church. *Id.* The court reasoned that "Municipalities have numerous ways of generating revenue without preventing tax-free religious land uses." *Id.* In fact, the court reasoned, "the operation of the church will draw large numbers of people to the surrounding properties, which ... could be turned into revenue generating uses." *Id.* 

In our situation, even requiring congregants to travel a few extra bus stops to leave the City of Hartford is not the least restrictive means of generating revenue for the City. That would impose more restrictive means on the Church and Hartford residents wishing to practice their religion in Hartford.

### Award of Legal Fees

In passing RLUIPA unanimously, Congress created a private right of action for aggrieved churches to challenge adverse land use decisions in court (42 U.S.C. § 2000cc-2(a)) and required municipalities to pay the attorneys' fees of churches that successfully assert RLUIPA claims (42 U.S.C. § 1988(b)). "The purpose of an award of attorney fees under [42 U.S.C] § 1988 is to ensure effective access of the judicial process for persons with civil rights grievances." *Rocky Mountain Christian Church v. Bd. Of Cnty. Comm'rs Of Boulder Cnty., Colo*, No. 06-CV-00554-REB-BNB, 2010 WL 148289, at \*2 (D. Colo. Jan. 11, 2010) (internal quotation marks omitted) (awarding \$1,252,327 in reasonable attorney fees and \$89,664 in reasonable expenses).

#### Conclusion

We respectfully request that the City of Hartford, acting by its Planning and Zoning Commission, consider this additional information on the law and facts establishing that the City's current three-acre mandate for religious assembly violates RLUIPA and its Connecticut counterpart. The Church further requests favorable action on its request for a text amendment which reduces the minimum acreage from 3 acres to 0.5 acres for houses of worship such as is proposed here.

Very truly yours, GREGORY AND ADAMS, P.C.

By: James D'Alton Murphy
James D'Alton Murphy

#### Enclosures

cc: Aimee Chambers, Director, Hartford Planning Department

Paul Ashworth, Senior Planner, Hartford Planning Department

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Michael Marcheschi, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints



