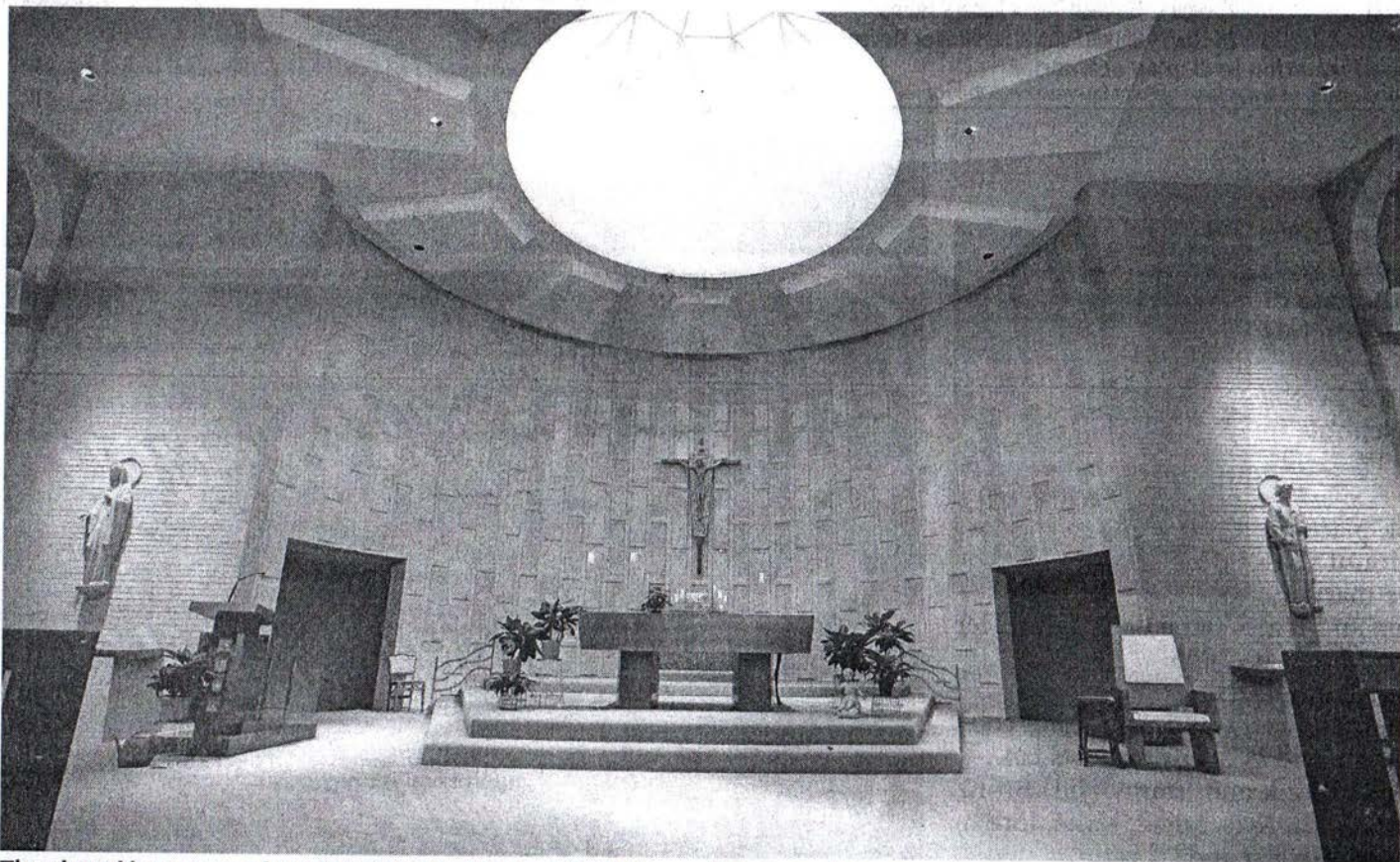


ONE LAST GIFT FOR THE COMMUNITY



The chapel is seen on Thursday, Oct. 22, 2020, at the Sisters of St. Joseph Convent in Stevens Point.

PHOTOS BY TORK MASON/USA TODAY NETWORK-WISCONSIN

Inside the plans to redevelop Stevens Point's historic convent

Alan Hovorka Stevens Point Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK – WISCONSIN

STEVENS POINT – Tears welled in Sister Michelle Wronkowski's eyes as she recalled an August Mass held in the chapel of the historic the Sisters of St. Joseph Convent convent. While only four sisters were present, it felt like more.

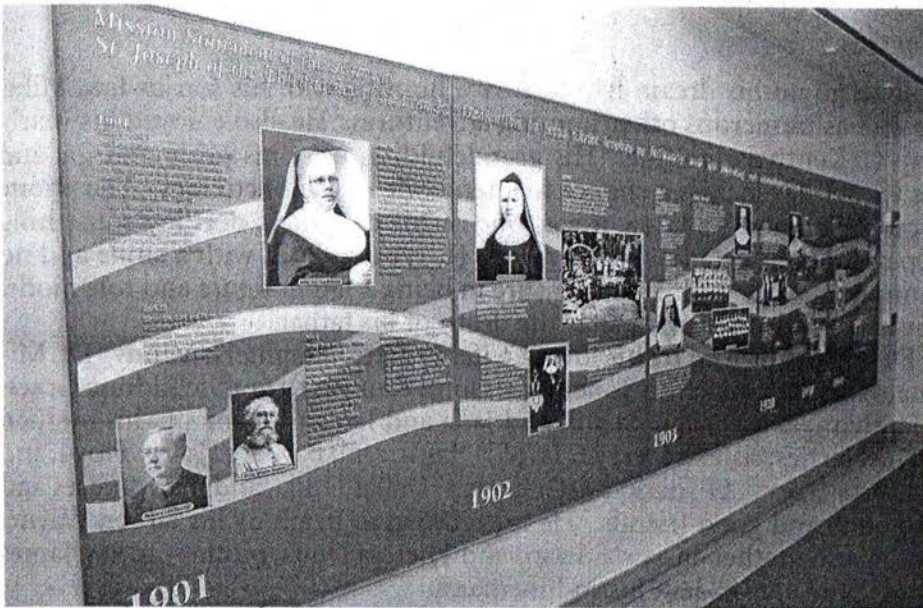
"Throughout the whole liturgy, the pews kept creaking as if the sisters were coming in. The benches were creaking as if it was full. It felt like the chapel was full," Wronkowski said. "It was powerful. (The chapel is) asking to be used. It has energy."

And the almost 120-year-old home of the Sisters of St. Joseph of the Third Order of St. Francis on Maria Drive could very well find a new use again soon. The order now looks to one last project to benefit the Stevens Point community and cap off a legacy of social justice and environmentalism as the order makes the slow farewell from their founding city.

Last year, the Sisters of St. Joseph announced it would centralize its some 200-member order, which has locations in Ohio, Illinois and Wisconsin, in Ohio through at least the next five years in response to a shrinking and aging congregation. Now, the sisters are ready to share their vision for how they want to redevelop their home.

Nuns envision new foundational neighborhood created in the Franciscan spirit

- Rather than sell the property to the highest bidder and depart Stevens Point, the order's plan is to slowly transform their historic property. They hope to turn a one-time cornerstone of life in Stevens Point into a new multi-



A display bearing a historical timeline is seen on Thursday, Oct. 22, 2020, at the Sisters of St. Joseph Convent in Stevens Point.

Convent

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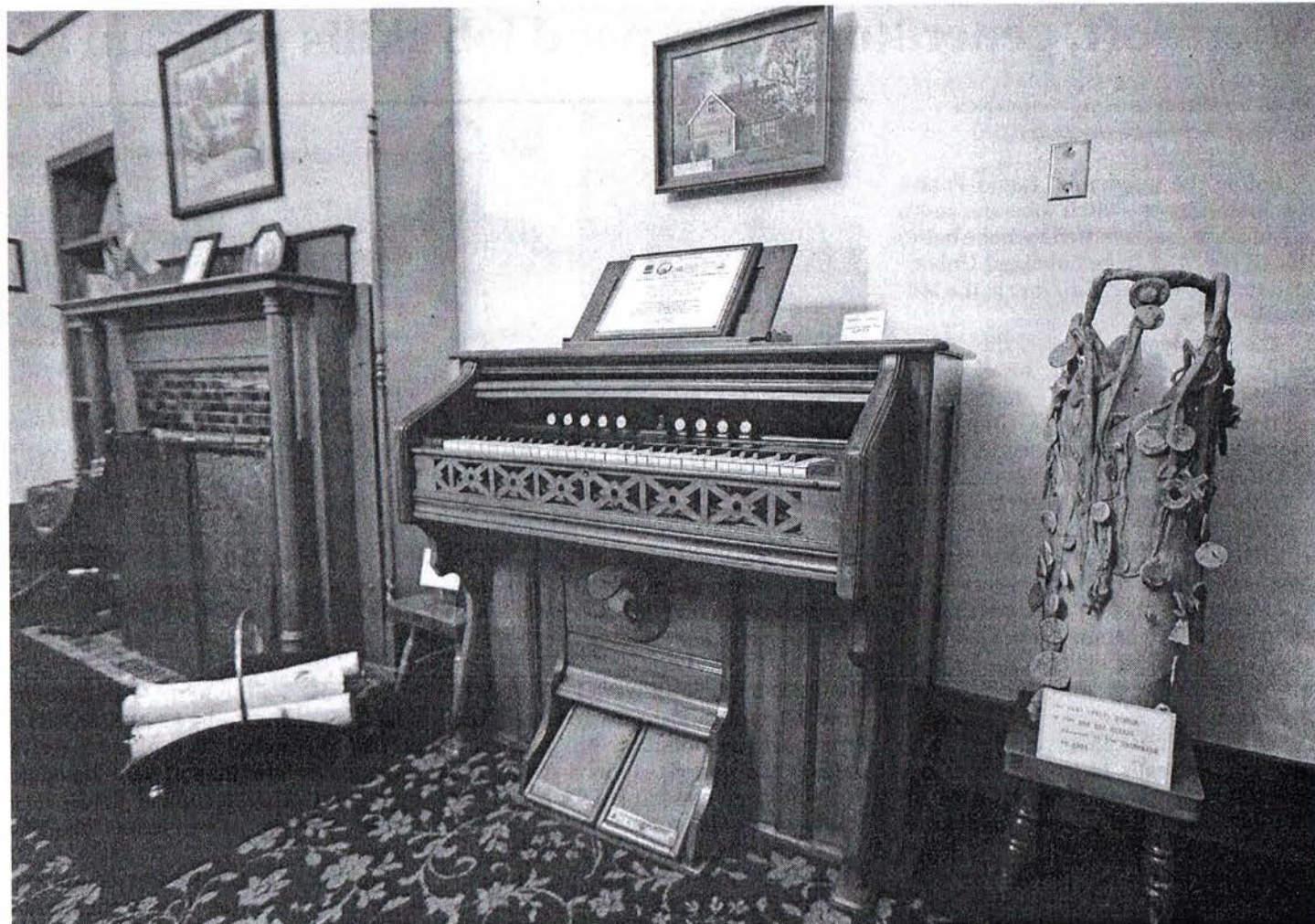
generational neighborhood on the city's north side that's in keeping with Franciscan ideals that nature and community go hand in hand.

The plan's first phase, revealed in October, would start the new neighborhood with a nucleus of 102 units spread across senior-living apartments and townhomes marketed toward recent college graduates. The plans also include preserving a large number of trees on the property in the form of an urban forest park.

The redevelopment of the convent also includes transforming the historic chapel into a headquarters for a yet-to-be-named nonprofit whose work focuses on serving the Stevens Point area. Jewison said they may announce the nonprofit's identity in December.

The plans come as only a handful of sisters remain in Stevens Point, Wronkowski said. The rest of the members of the Stevens Point order have since made the journey to Marymount Health Care Systems in Garfield Heights, Ohio, a suburb of Cleveland.

The sisters will work with General Capital Acquisitions, a Milwaukee-area developer that is also working with the city of Stevens Point on a senior-living apartment complex on Water Street, across from Edgewater Manor.



The original chapel organ is seen on Thursday, Oct. 22, 2020, at the Sisters of St. Joseph Convent in Stevens Point. TORK

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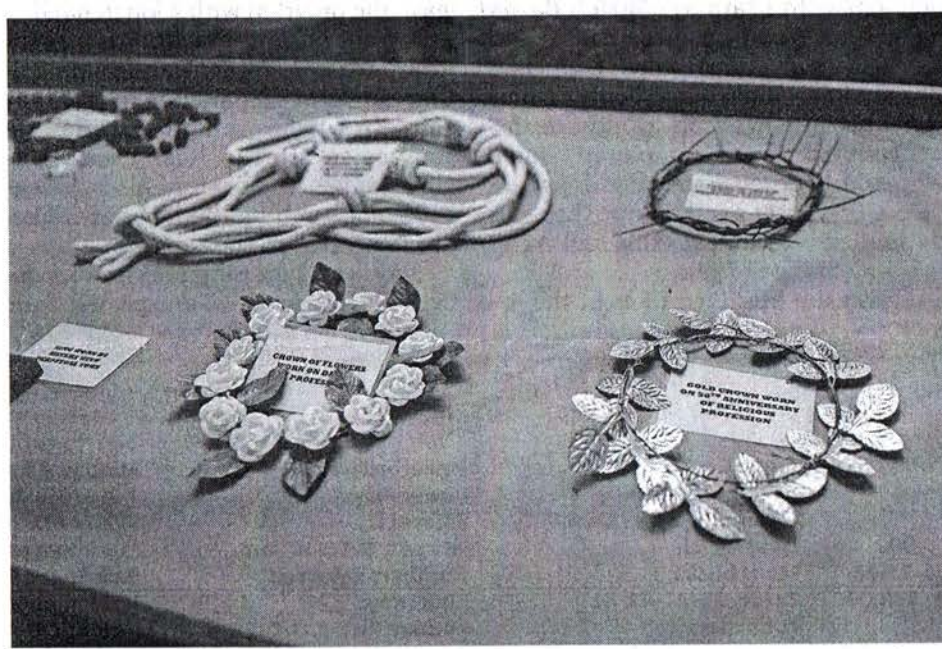
For the sisters, however, meeting the developer felt like they were walking the path laid out from on high. The developer previously worked with the School Sisters of St. Francis in Milwaukee, the order from which a group of nuns split to create their own congregation in Stevens Point more than 100 years ago.

In 1901, 46 sisters formed their own congregation in Stevens Point after Swiss-German Bishop Sebastian Messmer allowed them to leave The German School Sisters of St. Francis in Milwaukee. The group moved to Stevens Point to educate and uplift the large population of Polish immigrants. The order went on to educate generations of children and expanded operations into five states, including running medical facilities.

“(General Capital) is also sensitive to our values. They’re saying the sisters won’t be here but they will be here in a sense and what does that here look like for the next hundred years,” said Sister Judy Jewison, strategic planner for the Stevens Point convent. “They are very sensitive to that.”

The order has not sold the convent to General Capital. Rather, the two parties have a tentative agreement to sell the property based on the progress of the project, including securing tax credits and city approvals.

The order estimates construction on the first phase to start and end next year and open for occupancy in 2022, Jewison said. The project will help the order finance the health care of its members so sisters are able to live out their twilight years with quality care in an environment that’s in keeping with their beliefs, Wronkowski said.



A variety of ceremonial headpieces are seen on Thursday, Oct. 22, 2020, at the Sisters of St. Joseph Convent in Stevens Point. TORK MASON/USA TODAY

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The first phase would redevelop 10 acres of the 40-acre property, creating 85 apartments by renovating the original 1901 building, the 1915 expansion and the 1965 Maria Center. General Capital would then build 17 new townhomes behind the convent. The project also includes renovations for the existing powerplant and parking garage.

The developer plans to keep the historical facade intact. Future phases would focus on the western portions of the property that could mean a new neighborhood home to several hundred people, Jewison said.

The focus on creating an intergenerational community comes from the order’s Franciscan beliefs, which place a high importance on welcoming people of all walks of life.

“Francis would not let anyone be excluded,” Wronkowski said. “They all have a piece of their truth. And they all have God within them. So, it’s connecting the two is kind of exciting to see how that works.”

Throughout all phases, the developer plans to build around the existing forest on the property, when possible, preserving the oldest trees, including those

as old, or older, than the convent itself. The first phase calls for creating an urban forest sanctuary park on the southeastern part of the property, near Prentice Street and Maria Drive.

Some residents, however, expressed concern at the proposed plans during an October plan commission meeting to rezone the area, saying they thought the area had enough apartments and the project would congest Maria Drive.

The project would open the property up to the public with more walking and bike paths, offering new connections to Pacelli Catholic High School and Stevens Point Area Senior High, which sandwich the property, Wronkowski said. The order and the developer are also working through ways to embed the order’s history on those walking paths through some sort of outdoor exhibit or display.

More importantly, the property itself is its own cathedral, Wronkowski said. The Franciscan way of life focuses on communal living with nature. While people may think of the brick and mortar of the chapel and the convent being the convent, it’s in fact the entire 40 acres that holds a place of holiness for the order. Making sure the forest on the property was preserved came as a high priority, she said.

“We had some people come in here saying that we have a cathedral of trees, this is it, and it’s right in the city and how can we take these iron gates down and open it up so all would be included?” Wronkowski said.

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