

As the head of an organization that oversees schools for lower-income kids from immigrant families, I often find myself praying for help. It's an annual struggle to find the resources to ensure that our students can get the education they need to make their way in the world. At our school in Crown Heights, which has educated children from Haitian and other families for nearly five decades, I pray we can keep our historic school building from literally falling apart.

That is why I would call it a miracle that we discovered we could use our parking lot to create a project that would bring both affordable housing to our community and provide our school with the resources it needs to restore our 131-year-old building. But now, unfortunately, there are some who are opposing this project, putting our miracle, and our kids, at risk.

The opposition is surprising to me. Until very recently, our Hebron Seventh-day Adventist Bilingual School did not receive any attention at all from the folks who now seem concerned about the state of our church and school, a landmark that was originally the Methodist Home for the Aging. To add insult to injury, they are also now claiming their campaign to block our project is in order to "protect" the buildings we are trying to save, which have been deteriorating in front of them for years. We find this duplicitous and deceptive.

The project we are proposing would be built mainly on the vacant portion of our property, and would not require any demolition of the original building. In fact, our goal is the opposite: preservation.

So why would some of our neighbors oppose this plan? I suspect it is related to their other criticisms of our proposal, which are about its size and appearance.

One critique is that our project would be too large. But the 182-unit rent-stabilized residential building we are proposing would be within the existing zoning and would actually be the same height as an existing apartment building directly across the street. And it would be shorter than the highest point of our existing school.

Another argument is that our building's architecture does not suit the neighborhood. But our architect specifically designed the structure to echo the Romanesque style of our church, and its red brick façade is similar to most other apartment buildings you would find in Crown Heights.

So I would say that the opposition comes from something more self-interested. In a press release designed to undermine the project, opponents wrote that our new building would "disrupt the...social fabric of the neighborhood". The Hebron Church was founded in Crown Heights in 1956 by Haitian Immigrants seeking to practice their faith in a new land. Nearly 20 years later they established a school to provide our children academic excellence in the context of their culture and faith. Today the school serves a multi-cultural clientele.

We have been a stable influence in Crown Heights' social fabric for over 60 years. Our goal is to strengthen this social fabric and not to weaken it; to preserve it and not let it fall apart.

Families, like the ones who emigrated here following the 2010 earthquake in Haiti, depend on our school and also need affordable places to live. Vacant land in New York is rare, and opportunities to build housing that benefit a school while preserving the history of a neighborhood are almost unheard of.

In the coming months, we will engage with community members in a public process to educate them about the benefits of our project. Ultimately, the City will decide whether or not we can save our school by building housing on our property. For our kids and our families, I pray they do the right thing.

*Dr. Daniel Honore is the President of the Northeastern Conference of the Seventh-day Adventists.*