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Newark rebuts Myers' retirement mansion criticism

by Brian Roewe

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With backlash building faster than the three-story extension to Archbishop John Myers' soon-to-be retirement residence, the Newark, N.J., archdiocese responded Tuesday to the criticism.

A statement on the archdiocese's official blog classified recent news coverage of the construction as containing "a number of misrepresentations." It clarified that Myers' principal residence has been the rectory of the Cathedral Basilica of the Sacred Heart in Newark, "where he lives in community with four other priests." It also noted that previous bishops -- including Archbishop Peter Leo Gerety and Cardinal Theodore McCarrick -- also maintained weekend residences.

As first reported by the Newark *Star-Ledger*, Myers' 4,500-square-foot weekend residence is currently undergoing a \$500,000 renovation (before furnishings, landscaping and other costs) to add a three-story, 3,000-square-foot wing in preparation of his eventual retirement. Realtors differ on what constitutes a mansion, but typically place the minimum square footage between 6,000 and 8,000.

Blueprints show the expected amenities will include a library, three fireplaces, a gallery for panoramic views of the grounds, a hot tub, and an endless pool (used for swimming laps) -- adding to the outdoor pool already on the grounds.

Speaking to *The New York Times* on Wednesday, Newark communications director Jim Goodness clarified that the hot tub is actually a whirlpool and a necessity given Myers' age, 72: "He's getting older -- there are therapeutic issues."

The archdiocese's statement said the home was purchased in 2002 with funds from the sale of a Jersey Shore property donated to the church 20-plus years ago. It defended the construction costs, saying the funds came from private donations "specifically given for this purpose" and also from the sale of excess

archdiocesan properties.

"The sale of these properties is expected to not only pay for the construction, but also to return funds to the Archdiocese for other ministry uses," it said, adding that the archdiocese does not pay real estate taxes on the residence, and that neither parishioner funds nor contributions to the Archbishop's Annual Appeal would go toward the renovation.

Some have questioned how the archdiocese can justify such spending at a time when its schools have faced depleting finances and enrollments. As of April 2013, Newark has half as many Catholic schools open as it did a decade before, and in 2012, eight schools shut down. In its statement, the archdiocese said no schools or convents would be sold for the project and noted that in recent years it has spent approximately \$15 million annually to maintain its schools.

While the archdiocese's statement didn't address observations that such construction is occurring at a time when Pope Francis has called for "a church that is poor and for the poor" and asked clergy to avoid lavishes like new cars and seek more humble means, the *Times* asked Goodness if the \$500,000 could be used in another way, such as feeding the homeless.

"Any extra monies will go to the diocese," he told the *Times*.

[Brian Roewe is an *NCR* staff writer. Follow him on Twitter: @BrianRoewe.]

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