

Church at center of homeless shelter debate targeted for seizure

Timing of Toms River Township's pending eminent domain ordinance cannot be ignored, homeless advocates say

BOBBY BRIER, MENTAL HEALTH WRITER | JUNE 2, 2025 | [SOCIAL ISSUES](#), [HOUSING](#)



Credit: (Bobby Brier/NJ Spotlight News)

Christ Episcopal Church, located at 415 Washington Street in Toms River, and a local nonprofit are looking to build a 17-bed overnight shelter for homeless people on the church's property. The Toms River Zoning Board of Adjustment is set to vote on the application to build on June 12.

On an overcast afternoon in May, Mark Mossop Jr. stood outside the Ocean County Library in Toms River and spoke about his fight to find a place to live.

"I've been homeless (for) two years. I haven't been housed or put in a hotel once," Mossop, 35, told NJ Spotlight News. "I sleep outside at the library because there's nowhere else to go," he said.



Credit: (Bobby Brier/NJ Spotlight News)

May 22, 2025: Mark Mossop Jr., a resident of Toms River who is homeless, speaks during a Toms River Zoning Board of Adjustment meeting.

While local organizations provide food and laundry services, Mossop said that Christ Episcopal Church on Washington Street has been "extremely helpful" in providing services for people who are homeless.

"They're the only ones that put together a thing called Agency Day where they have all the agencies come out and we try to work with them and see what resources and help we can get," Mossop said.

"They give us clothes. They have a mobile shower unit come out so we can take showers there."

But [the church, which has been in the community for well over a century](#), is at risk of being seized through eminent domain if the Toms River Township Council adopts an ordinance to do so. [That ordinance](#), which is [expected to be voted on at a July 30 council meeting](#), would

allow the township to acquire the nearly 11-acre church property, along with [three private marinas](#) downtown and a vacant lot.

Plan to raze the church, make room for a park

Toms River Mayor Daniel Rodrick, a Republican, envisions the church property as part of a large waterfront park, including a soccer field on the site of the church building, eight pickleball courts, a skatepark and a large playground. [According to the Asbury Park Press](#), Rodrick has argued that the heavily populated downtown has few recreational options for residents and the church property would allow him to create that recreational option. But at an April 30 council meeting when the eminent domain ordinance was first read and introduced, well over

100 church members, homeless advocates and community members gathered to oppose the plan. [Three council members also strongly voiced their opposition.](#)

The church's fight to keep its Washington Street property is now the focal point of an intense debate in Toms River over land use, public safety and services for homeless people. This very local dispute is also an example of a larger fight playing out across the country, pitting local governments against those working to end homelessness amid an affordable housing crisis. A growing facet of that fight is local laws that ban sleeping in public places.



Toms River Mayor Daniel Rodrick

"There seems to be a large reliance on very negative stereotypes about people who are our neighbors, our family [and] our friends without any understanding that pretty much most of us are one or two paychecks away from not being able to pay our mortgage or our rent and be out there," said The Rev. Lisa Hoffman, the rector of Christ Episcopal Church.

Church's plan to expand homeless facility

The Affordable Housing Alliance, a local nonprofit, rents second-floor office space from the church in a building on the grounds to run a resource center that works to connect the local homeless population with housing opportunities, according to Hoffman. Last year, the nonprofit asked the church about converting the lower level of the building into an [overnight homeless shelter for 17 people](#). The shelter would require background checks of the people who would use it, and would not be a drop-in shelter, Hoffman said.

The church agreed to help the nonprofit with this request and applied for a zoning variance, which, if approved, would allow for an addition to be built onto the church building that the nonprofit is already renting.

The shelter would include showers, laundry services and an elevator to the building's second floor where the Affordable Housing Alliance operates its resource center. The shelter would be operated by the nonprofit, according to Hoffman.

Advocates for the homeless, including Taiisa Kelly of Monarch Housing Associates, said the timing of the township's pending eminent domain ordinance cannot be ignored.

The Rev. Lisa Hoffman confirmed in a recent interview that the Christ Episcopal Church property is not for sale.

"This eminent domain conversation has started while the church and their partner organization are in the midst of a conversation trying to secure zoning approval to use the space as an emergency shelter, so I don't think you can separate the two," said Kelly, the CEO of the nonprofit, which conducts the state's annual point-in-time homeless count.

"To me, it seems like a very clear case of retaliation because they don't want that type of activity happening in Toms River. This is not the first time there has been some pushback against efforts to support people experiencing homelessness in Toms River," said Kelly.



May 22, 2025: Members of the Toms River Zoning Board of Adjustment listen during the public comment portion of a meeting about the application from Christ Episcopal Church and the Affordable Housing Alliance to build an overnight shelter for homeless people on the church's property.

Rodrick did not respond to multiple requests for comment from NJ Spotlight News regarding the pending ordinance and the church's proposal to build a 17-bed overnight homeless shelter on its property. None of the Toms River Township Council members responded to a request for comment.

National trend

[More than 12,600 people in New Jersey were homeless](#) on a single night in late January last year, a 24% increase compared to 2023, according to the state's latest annual point-in-time count data.

More than 160 cities across the country have passed anti-camping or anti-sleeping ordinances since the [U.S. Supreme Court's 6-3 decision](#) in the [City of Grants Pass, Oregon v. Johnson](#) case last June, according to Jesse Rabinowitz, the communications and campaign director for the National Homelessness Law Center in Washington, D.C.

[That Supreme Court decision cleared the way for local governments to enforce bans on homeless people sleeping outside](#) in public places. Another 93 anti-camping or anti-sleeping laws have been introduced in cities since the Grants Pass decision, according to Rabinowitz.

'Then you want to tear down the only church that has us come out and helps us get resources [and] food.' — Mark Mossop Jr., who has been homeless for two years.

New Jersey local governments that have recently considered ordinances that would ban camping or sleeping in public places include [Summit](#), Paterson and Morristown.

[Paterson](#) and Morristown backed away from their proposed ordinances after pushback from members of the public.

In Summit, Common Council members voted to table two different ordinances aimed at addressing encampments and have introduced a new ordinance that they developed alongside Jeff Wild, an attorney and co-founder of the New Jersey Coalition to End Homelessness, which better reflects the council's intent, according to Jenny Hoff, a spokesperson for the City of Summit. The [new ordinance](#) formalizes the city's current approach, which seeks to

help people experiencing homelessness connect with housing and support services before any citations are issued, according to Hoff.

A hearing on the new Summit ordinance is scheduled for June 3.

Across the state, many local governments already have variations of laws that prohibit sleeping in public places. They include [Monroe Township](#) in Middlesex County, [Asbury Park](#) in Monmouth County, [Middle Township](#) in Cape May County, [Atlantic City](#), [Egg Harbor](#) Township and [Hammonton](#) in Atlantic County and [Roselle Park](#) in Union County. In [Keyport](#), Monmouth County, people are not allowed to camp, stay, sleep or live at public areas that are identified as beachfronts or waterfronts, unless the borough approves a special use permit, according to a borough ordinance.

NJ towns that ban sleeping in public



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A problem in Ocean County

The Toms River dispute highlights the lack of resources for the homeless in Ocean County.

The county does not have a permanent overnight homeless shelter, according to Ocean County Administrator Michael J. Fiore. The county does have a [Code Blue warming center in Toms River](#), most recently operated by Collaborative Support Programs of New Jersey, a nonprofit that provides staffing, transportation and food to people at the warming center, according to Fiore.

More than 150 people attended a Toms River zoning board meeting on April 10, and a [majority of those in attendance clearly indicated that they do not want the overnight shelter in their neighborhood](#), according to the Asbury Park Press. During a packed zoning board meeting in late May, community members and homeless advocates remained divided on the proposed plan. The zoning board is scheduled to vote on the church's pending application to build the shelter during a June 12 meeting.

Hoffman of Christ Episcopal Church said in a recent [letter to community members](#) that the church had "less than 24 hours' notice" that the ordinance was on the township council's agenda for the April 30 meeting. The notice did not come from the council, but rather from a member of the community who had read the agenda and communicated this to the church, the letter says. Hoffman confirmed in a recent interview with NJ Spotlight News that the church property is not for sale.

An online petition that is seeking to stop Toms River from buying or taking the church property through eminent domain has [over 7,900 signatures](#) on [change.org](#).

During the public comment period of the April 30 council meeting, Mossop underscored the need for more support for people experiencing homelessness in Toms River.

"I am a caretaker to a 78-year-old lady [who] I let sleep in my tent because she can't find help from this county. How is that fair?" Mossop said.

"Then you want to tear down the only church that has us come out and helps us get resources [and] food."

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