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Church reveals multimillion dollar investment in town

By Don Farmer



MASTERTON District Council's hearings committee hears submissions yesterday on the Solway church proposal. In the public gallery were several members of Masterton's Exclusive Brethren congregation.

EXCLUSIVE Brethren church members have invested millions of dollars in Masterton since selecting the town as an ideal place to settle.

This was made public during a special hearing in Masterton yesterday involving a bid by the Brethren to establish a church at Solway.

In a submission to Masterton District Council's hearings committee Tyler Ross, of Tomlinson and Carruthers Surveyors, said the Exclusive Brethren congregation is "relatively new to the area" but have brought with them expertise and resources to establish businesses and

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“contribute positively to the Masterton community”.

Mr Ross has qualifications in resource and environmental planning and is helping the church members in their bid to be granted resource consent to relocate a building from Ashhurst to Solway Crescent to be used as a church. The application is in the name of Miles Suckling, who owns land at Solway.

Mr Ross said Exclusive Brethren members had researched Masterton before deciding to move here. They had been impressed with the community, its facilities and “above all the energy of the township” that indicated Masterton was surging forward. Church members had contributed several million dollars buying property and setting up businesses, he said. They had so much interest in the development of Masterton, and Wairarapa generally, that members are encouraging AirNZ Link to do a feasibility study on providing a regional air transport route using Hood Aerodrome.

Yesterday’s hearing was brought about after several residents living in the Solway Crescent area objected to Mr Suckling’s proposal to establish a church there. In the district plan, places of assembly, including churches, are allowed within the business management areas of town but not in residential areas.

Objectors heard by the hearings committee yesterday included Elizabeth Barrett-Hackel, director of the adjacent Solstone Estate Winery, Yvonne Craig-Simpson, Duncan Simpson, Lawrence Gray, Gaye Gray and Rex Bateman. Grounds for objection centred round the likely increase in traffic in Solway Crescent, noise and light “spill” created by the coming and going of church members, especially early in the morning on weekends when the church holds 6am “Lord’s Supper” services.

In an earlier, written submission Mrs Barrett-Hackel raised issues regarding safety and trespass but her attempts to widen her objections yesterday to include alleged behaviour of church members at the Solway site was disallowed by committee chairman Gavin McLachlan.

Advice to the hearings committee from the council’s district planner, Sue Southey, is that the application by the church should be turned down. This is because the effects on the community of having a church there with early morning services would be “more than minor” and because granting consent will falsely indicate churches are acceptable in residential areas “thus setting a precedent”.

Mr Ross said the Exclusive Brethren congregation of about 50 people in Masterton has been renting a building in Hope Street which it would continue to do should the application for the Solway church succeed. Not all church members would attend Lord’s Supper morning services at Solway, which would be mostly restricted to those within walking distance of the church and not many cars would be used to bring people to the early services. Plans are also afoot to eventually build a “City Room” on a larger area of land and involving a new building in another part of Masterton district. When this is done then services at Solway would not be as regular as is now planned, being on six days of the week.

Mrs Southey’s claim that allowing the church would give a false impression that churches are acceptable in residential areas – and would set a precedent – was described by Mr Ross as a “misrepresentation”. “The fact is that a high number of churches, and religious assemblies, are located within areas in Masterton zoned residential.” These are: Christian Covenant Centre, 92 Oxford Street; Jehovah’s Witness, 259 High Street; St James Union Church, 116 High

Street; Seventh Day Adventist Church, corner Church and Archer streets; Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, Opaki Road; Presbyterian Church, 1 Totara Street; Masterton Christian Fellowship, 227 High Street.

Lawrence Gray told the committee he had lived at 117 Solway Crescent for 30 years and that the road tapered to only 3.6m in width in a 70kmh speed zone. Two cars could not pass there without one going on to the grass berm and the street was a popular spot for walkers. He estimated an additional 500 cars a month would use the road if the church was allowed there. Traffic noise and car headlights during the hours of darkness would be an annoyance for existing residents. "We strongly oppose this church," Mr Gray said.

Rex Bateman said he has lived directly across the road from the land earmarked by the Exclusive Brethren for the church for about eight years. Traffic has already increased since Mr Suckling shifted to the area to live, he said. Until now traffic noise in Solway Crescent has been minimal even given the arrival of Solstone vineyard. Referring to other sources of noise raised by Mr Ross he said he "doesn't hear a thing" from a nearby truck yard and only hears passing trains as they cross the railway bridge over the Waingawa. Mr Bateman said the planned early-morning church gatherings on weekends would be a problem as people could start arriving from as early as 5.30am in a street that is now, at that time of day, "deadly quiet".

The committee has reserved its decision which is likely to be known in about 14 days.

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