

## **Board of Trustees Recommendation to Sell the Freestone Property November 2, 2025**

Why now? Why is the Board making this recommendation when the Freestone Committee has found funding to meet the first milestone of the Resolution? First of all, we recognize that the Freestone Committee has done a tremendous amount of work to get to this point. Dave Wemmer's work in particular is nothing short of heroic.

There are a number of reasons why we are making this recommendation now, after having two+ years of living with Resolution 22-1.

### **1. Freestone is not one of our congregation's demonstrated top priorities.**

In a 2022 congregational survey, UUCB members were asked to indicate their favorite thing about UUCB. The results were as follows: Music (20%), Worship (14%), and Social Justice (11%). When asked to identify the top 3 functions of UUCB, the responses were as follows: Building and Fostering Community (55%), Social Justice (34%), and Worship (13%).

These responses reflect what we see at UUCB: an incredible music program with many offerings, a very active social justice council, and people building community in a number of ways, such as the very popular lunches after service and numerous well-attended Chalice Circles. Since 2022 and in response to the 2024 presidential election, the Social Justice Council has become even larger and more active.

Although there is a small group of very passionate and hardworking members of the Freestone Committee, it would be hard to argue that Freestone is a top priority for a large number of our members, nor have we seen interest in it growing.

### **2. But doesn't having retreats help meet the congregation's priority for building and fostering community?**

There is a difference between supporting congregational retreats and owning a property that can be used only for small retreats or occasional larger retreats when permitted by the County. We don't need to own property to support ways for members to gather in retreats.

### **3. What is so different now than in 2022–23 when Rev. Michelle guided us through an extensive process?**

For one thing, issues of social justice have grown tremendously since that process. With the recent election, we are facing extraordinary oppressive, authoritarian, and unjust actions in American society. Rejuvenation in a retreat setting during anxious and disturbing times is good for the soul, but responsibilities that come with property ownership and management distract us from important work.

### **4. Will Freestone be able to be financially self-sustaining?**

Per Sonoma County zoning regulations, the Freestone property can be used as a Single Family Residence, not as a retreat center. One source of revenue that has been floated is using the property for Airbnb-type short-term rentals, since a County permit allowing this was obtained. More than 20% of the rental income would go to county-required costs; in addition, there would be responsibilities and costs for management and professional cleaning prior to any paid rental.

The Freestone Committee has estimated that ongoing costs for insurance, property tax, utilities and repairs, and road maintenance could be supported by short-term rentals. But that future is not guaranteed. The 6-person occupancy limits don't apply for uses for which we do not collect rent, so small church groups/families could use the property. However, zoning limits the usage to 3 special events (e.g., an event for more than 30 people) every 2 years.

### **5. The congregation is currently deeply divided over Freestone; what does this mean for the future?**

The congregation has been divided on the topic of Freestone for many, many years. In 2018, more than 50% of the congregation voted to sell Freestone (but the Board had required a 2/3 majority for the motion to pass). The March 2023 resolution passed with a small majority (87 to 78). The motion from the Freestone Committee to extend the milestone dates passed very narrowly (77 to 74) in the April 2025 special Congregational Meeting. The question is how this division affects our community going forward.

The deep divide about Freestone has a variety of negative impacts, including raising questions for newcomers if they want to join, discouraging some individuals from considering joining the Board of Trustees, and contributing to feelings of fatigue and burn-out among Board members and congregants.

## **6. UUCB's lack of full investment in Freestone: concerns about the responsibility of Freestone falling only on volunteers.**

For many years, the congregation has been clear that Freestone needs to be financially self-sufficient. Resolution 22-1 passed in March 2023 included specific language making it clear that “no-to-very-minimal net cost, including staff time” come from UUCB for Freestone” unless approved by the congregation. Relying on a committee of volunteers, albeit very hardworking, to manage, maintain, and fund a property that is owned by the church and for which the church is liable is problematic.

Without staff oversight, there can be diffusion and confusion related to decision-making authority and accountability.

## **7. Concerns about the sustainability of Freestone over time.**

There are several things that suggest to the Board that Freestone is not a top priority for the majority of members and make us question its sustainability. These include:

- a. The Freestone Committee is quite small.
- b. There are a very small number of congregants who volunteer their time to help Freestone. Recruiting volunteers for church projects is challenging even when people are already at a given location (think of Sunday lunches at UUCB); the board questions whether there will be enough volunteers willing to travel regularly to Sonoma to support Freestone.
- c. The funding to meet the first milestone came from only two member households, rather than from an outflowing of support from a large percentage of the congregation.

## **8. Inherent structural flaws with the Dome at Freestone.**

The original dome was constructed with a design flaw that has, over time, resulted in significant outward movement of the stem walls, causing cracked windows, leaks, drywall damage, openings in the walls, mold, etc. There have been several attempts to stop the movement in the walls and many repairs to the windows, interior, siding, and roofing. This is repairable, but at significant cost.

**9. \$250,000 is probably not enough for permitting and Phase 1 repairs.** The projected costs of for permitting and Phase 1 Repairs are three years old. Costs for

materials, labor, and permits have very likely increased since then. One estimate for engineering costs has already doubled in three years.

## **10. Looking to the Future**

We don't want to learn five years down the road (and \$300,000+ has been invested and countless hours have gone into repairing the building) that the Freestone experiment isn't viable. How disappointing that would be for those who contributed considerable time, talent, and treasure to maintaining this property.

## **11. Moving the Board's rightful focus on vision and policy to operational matters.**

Per our governance structure the Board's main work should be visioning and setting policy. Freestone necessitates that the Board spend an inordinate amount of time on operational matters.

The Board's role in visioning and decision-making is noted on the UUA website, UUCB's in the Governance Manual and Bylaws, and in the Aspirational Covenant of the Board. When making decisions, this includes keeping the needs of the entire congregation as well as future members in mind.

## **12. Freestone is taking up a disproportionate amount of the Board's time and energy.**

The process of getting to this first milestone has already involved considerable time and focus for the Board of Trustees. Many issues and updates regarding Freestone have required Board attention. The time and attention the Board will need to give to Freestone is going to continue and likely increase if the Freestone Committee moves forward with the next phases of work outlined in Resolution 22-1 (e.g., architectural plans, building permit, and a \$250,000 reconstruction/rehabilitation project).

Board members are willing to work hard. However, when they spend more time on Freestone than on any other church activity, many Board members find themselves asking "Is this a top priority for our congregation right now?" Due to a focus on Freestone, some other pressing needs that require Board time and energy, including making decisions about a much-needed capital campaign, have been put on the backburner.

### **13. Time required by the Freestone Oversight Committee**

We are 2+ years into Resolution 22-1 and it's clear that Freestone Oversight Committee members are dedicating a lot of time to that role. This is time and energy that could be spent on other church needs that are more central to the entire congregation. Members of FOC have stated there are other programs they could be working on if not for the time spent on Freestone.

### **14. UUCB has a beautiful, vibrant campus at 1 Lawson Drive that has significant capital needs.**

The Kensington campus is regularly used 6–7 days a week and is central to our functioning. This is where we worship, the choir practices, we serve and eat Sunday lunches, our children attend religious education classes, etc.

Our Lawson Road buildings are beautiful, sound, well designed and well-constructed buildings with great “bones.” But it is 65 years old. The main building needs painting, caulking, doors, windows and heating and electrical system modernization. The school buildings and grounds need complete upgrades to meet current school standards and codes, including roofing and ventilation.

As we upgrade the 20 furnaces on campus, we hope to change from gas to electric and create an all-electric campus to reduce our carbon footprint, in line with our environmental values. We are considering becoming an emergency refuge center, but that will require showers and other amenities.

The staff and Building and Grounds committee are currently tracking projects with a total value of about \$1,000,000 plus another \$1,500,000 to replace very old gas heaters and upgrade to heat pumps, including the electrical infrastructure for that change.

### **15. UUCB has owned a retreat center for more than 90 years. Why would we give that up?**

Under Sonoma County's zoning, Freestone is a single-family home, thereby limiting our ability to consider and use it as an active retreat center. What if we considered other ways to have retreats rather than relying on a single-family residence in Sonoma County for that experience? Maybe a property for retreats doesn't need to be owned by UUCB. Maybe we could have different types of retreats for different retreat sizes and needs

