

**Freestone Committee Response to
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.

The Freestone Committee is inspired by the heroic members of our Congregation that have preceded us who gifted us this special resource along with their amazing contributions of time, talent and treasure. (If you haven't seen the short video of our predecessor's constructing the dome, check it out on the website. <https://uucb.org/community/interest-groups/freestone-retreat-in-sonoma/>) And thanks to the Board for recognition of all the hard work which has been substantial, particularly since the Congregation passed Resolution 22-1. It should also be recognized that significant donations were made to hire hydro-geologists, surveyors, grading contractor and well-drillers to drill two wells for purposes of increasing the value of the two adjacent lots, both of which turned up dry. The Committee hopes this also means you recognize the pain caused by your decision to ignore the congregational vote and reopen the congregation to unnecessary turmoil.

We have a vision for an incredible renewal for Freestone. Please join us.

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.

This ignores the Congregation's Resolution 22-1 passed in 2023 specifically addressing Freestone's future and reaffirmed only 6 mos ago. Freestone has been an important part of "Building and Fostering Community" within UUCB thus contributing to the top priority. And even if Freestone did not fall into one of these three high priority categories, it still contributes to the mission of the church like other important activities not atop the priority hierarchy.

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.

Again, the Board is disregarding the Congregational determination of Resolution 22-1. Freestone is not just a piece of real estate that can be easily substituted. It has a 50+ year history as part of our church, and it's Inverness predecessor had another 50 year history. If you're attentive, you can hear and feel the souls of our predecessors there. Members have their ashes spread on that sacred ground. Freestone provides a *unique* setting within which to build community, reconnect with the divine of nature and refresh to return to our work in the world. As far as use, as before, that will be use by individuals or by small groups which would be up to 15 members, but could even be a few more. This accommodated the vast majority of groups seeking a community building space. Larger events like a church picnic or wedding, with more than approximately thirty people, will require a county permit. The County limits these to a maximum of three in a two year period.

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.

Agreed we are facing oppressive authoritarian forces unlike before. However, if anything, that would favor holding onto, not selling, a refuge for members during these anxious and disturbing times. Fortunately, management of the property will continue to be performed by the Freestone Committee.

Also, note the church owns two residential rental properties in Kensington and El Cerrito, to which the congregation has no emotional or spiritual attachment. If the Board wants to reduce the “responsibilities that come with property ownership and management”, why not sell one or both of those properties in lieu of Freestone? Those sale proceeds from those properties could go to upcoming capital projects whereas proceeds from Freestone would most likely continue to be used to support ongoing retreat activities.

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.

Yes, we anticipate Freestone will be financially self-supporting as it has been for over 100 years. If it is not able to be self-sustaining, then per Resolution 22-1, the Board is directed to sell it.

Freestone is a single-family residence and our use of it is commensurate with that. It is akin to a second home or vacation home. We call it a retreat in the casual meaning of the word. We could have called it “the ranch”, “the farm’ or “buzzard’s roost”. We are not a Retreat Center. A retreat center is a formal commercial enterprise with formal programs available to the public at a cost e.g Spirit Rock. Our users are free to use it as they see fit.

In regards to occupancy we are limited to 6 persons when we collect rent like with AirBnB. When renting through AirBnB we also collect fees for administration and cleaning. Those are exempt from taxes and we get to set what those are. And yes we have to pay County taxes on rent, but the overall income we receive will be substantial compared to taxes. For use by members we will not charge rent, but we will collect administration and cleaning fees. So by not charging members rent we are not limited to a 6-person occupancy limit. Also by only charging admin and cleaning fees we maintain our historical affordability to the church community.

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.

The Church is governed by a democracy and decisions are made by majority rule. The Board neglects to mention that its decision to rescind the Congregations’ Resolution 22-1 was a bare majority, 5-4 vote. Four board members disagreed that the Resolution should be rescinded. After a lengthy and thorough process starting

4 years ago, led by Reverend Michelle, the congregation voted in favor of Resolution 22-1 to settle divisions and move forward. It was this Board's decision by a bare majority to overthrow that congregational vote, which is leading to fatigue and burn-out.

The Board needs to trust the congregation instead of inserting their one vote majority opinion and further divide the congregation.

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.

Many if not most activities at UUCB are volunteer run. We recognize that most Board members would prefer to simplify church operations and limit liability, but the congregation has voted this enterprise is important. Freestone has a long history of being run by volunteers, until the Board closed it nine years ago. The Freestone Committee was waiting for approval of the Offer before investing more time in a variety of activities, one being growing the Committee. That is still planned but we are pleased that just yesterday a former board member has joined the Committee. I welcome other interested members to reach out to Dave Wemmer on how you may help out (treasurer, weed eating, light carpentry, interior design and decorating?) at david.wemmer12@gmail.com.

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.

As noted above, the bottom line is if the enterprise is not able to be financially sustainable, the Board is directed to sell per the Resolution passed by the Congregation. We want the opportunity to succeed as directed by the congregational vote. The Board's closure of Freestone nine years ago has made it more challenging to recruit volunteers, and with its future in question, some members are hesitant to invest time in Freestone. The large number of people who spoke at Sunday's informational session shows there is still widespread support for Freestone even after being closed by the Board for 9 years.

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.

As correctly noted the original design decisions led to performance issues and the Committee hired a structural engineer back in 2017 and he designed a simple repair and prepared a repair plan. In accordance with a recent meeting with the engineer, Dave Wemmer and Tom Tripp, that plan is to be revised to improve performance and possibly save money. Dave Wemmer estimates the cost of the dome repair in the neighborhood of \$30,000 to \$40,000 if performed by a contractor, or a lot less if performed by qualified volunteers under the oversight of the engineer.

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.

The resolution includes the estimated costs for Phase 1 and was prepared in Sept. 2022. The costs ranged from \$40,000 to \$117,000 depending on whether the majority of the work was performed by church volunteers or a contractor. Another \$115,000 was for roadway improvements. So together total costs are between \$155,000 and \$232,000 in September 2022 dollars. Those costs included a 10% inflation factor. Indeed the market continues to change. Per the State of California Department of General Services the California Construction Cost Index shows annual inflation as follows for October to September of each year.

2022 to 2023 – 10.8%

2023 to 2024 – 1%

2024 to 2025 – 6.5%

So since we already accounted for 10% inflation, our estimate is only about 8.3% behind for inflation. So applying that to our costs our estimates update to \$168,000 and \$251,000.

Note that Dave Wemmer just repriced the material costs for all the replacement doors and windows and they are basically the same, a few hundred dollars more. One of the most important issues affecting cost is market conditions when going to bid. Will we be in a Trump driven recession next spring? Will people continue to sit on the sidelines of major investments due to economic uncertainty? Issues like this can move prices 20 or 30%. They could go up or they could go down. We won't know until we go out to bid.

We do not agree with the statement about the doubling of the engineering costs. We would be interested in seeing some backup to support that statement. We do know that architecture services will increase in cost due to our original architect having retired and a new one needing to get up to speed. It should be noted that engineering and architectural services are a small part of a project's overall cost, approximately 10%, and will not have a significant impact on the overall budget should they increase.

Existing donors and other congregants have expressed their willingness to make donations should they be needed. The bottom line appears to be that congregants are not going to let Freestone fail from a lack of funds to get it reopened.

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.

The Freestone Committee consists of members who have expertise in civil/structural engineering, construction, and cost estimating, and are fully capable of assessing the risks. Thank you, though, for your kind consideration of our delicate feelings!

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.

Paragraph 6.2 of our bylaws state that "The Board shall recognize the moral principle that all of its powers are subordinate to the will of the membership of the Church." Their revocation of Resolution 22-1 does not comply with this bylaw.

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.

Once up and running, as in the past, the Committee manages and operates Freestone with minimal attention needed. Currently the Freestone Oversight Committee is responsible for overseeing the ongoing work of the Freestone Committee which is minimizing Board required time and attention. For many of the past months the Oversight Committee's monthly report to the Board has been a consent agenda item requiring minimal Board time. We expect that to continue into the future once this Board-created avoidable expenditure of time and energy passes.

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.

The work of the FOC is very much appreciated in providing transparency to the program as required by the resolution. Time demands at this stage of the process are temporary and will subside once we open up to congregational use. If members of the FOC are feeling the time commitment to be too much, they could relinquish their position to a new member.

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.

Freestone has always operated as, and will continue to operate as, a separate and independent financial operation. It does not require any funding from the church and is not part of the church's capital program or general fund expenditures. However, we do recognize some minor administrative support. When soliciting donations for Freestone, the Committee asks that donors only donate above and beyond their other financial donations to the main church body. The Committee recognizes it is important that Freestone not impact church fund raising.

If the suggestion is that Freestone needs to be sold to fund the capital campaign, as noted above, the church owns two other valuable rental properties, which have no spiritual or emotional value to the congregation.

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

We have never been and do not want to be a formal retreat center. We call Freestone a retreat in the sense that we use it to build community and provide respite from stressful times. We also are not zoned for such a use.

The congregation has voted they want Freestone to be their retreat of choice. It has met all the needs of the congregation in the past and will again in the future. Freestone is ours and is sacred ground and our continued ownership will continue

to strengthen the ties to it. And while we continue to own it, it continues to appreciate. Why would we want to sell a piece of land in one of the most sought after areas of Sonoma County?

Please also refer to the response to above item 5.