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Temple seeks help for flood damage

by Gabe Donio
GAZETTE STAFF WRITER

HAMMONTON—Temple Beth El Synagogue on Bellevue Avenue has withstood many challenges in its nearly 73-year history. March's storm presented a significant one: a flooded basement that had been recently refurbished. Now, Temple Beth El's President Claudia Tung is seeking help from both the congregation and the community to help restore the basement – and potentially renew the historic synagogue building.

Tung recently gave *The Gazette* a tour of the significant damage caused by the flood in the synagogue's basement.

"With all the water that came in, we have a lot of mold. The entire floor is ruined. When I picked up the tiles, you could see the mold underneath and you can smell it in the building. The contractor said we had to pull out all the wainscoting, remove the walls and the flooring. It all has to come out," Tung said.

A tour through the building, with its Spanish-mission style exterior, theatre-style seating and stained-glass windows reveals a building with historic and cultural importance. While revitalizing and preserving the synagogue is the ultimate goal, repairing the basement is the most critical and immediate project, Tung said.

"At this point, we need to fix the basement so we can come back into the school and back into the sanctuary. Right now our phase I is securing financial funding to get the basement fixed and waterproofed. We have also seen interest in having the entire building revitalized, but our main focus is fixing the basement first," Tung said.

A timeline has been established to begin work on renovating the basement area. Tung said the congregation of Temple Beth El would accept help from everyone as they renew the building.

"We would like to get started by the end of May. This way we can hopefully say we are dry. Our members are ready to help with the effort because this is their synagogue. But we would certainly accept help from anyone," Tung said.

Tung said help from civic groups, school groups, businesses, contractors and members of other religious faith communities is also welcome.

"We are looking to the community if they would like to help us out with any further revitalization of this historic building," Tung said, noting the revitalization of the downtown area in recent years.

A cleanup will be held at Temple Beth El on April 25.

It appears the synagogue is readying for the next chapter in a local story that has

spanned more than 70 years, a story that began with a community-wide effort similar to the current drive to repair the damaged synagogue. The following history of the Temple Beth El Synagogue is taken from *The Story of Hammonton* by William McMahon.

"Temple Beth El in Hammonton, built in 1937, is one of the smallest congregations in the county and is the outcome of a group founded in August of 1934. Groundwork was laid by Samuel Kapnek when he moved to Hammonton from Ventnor and invited a small group of Jewish friends to his home to meet Rabbi Seligson of Beth Judah Synagogue, Ventnor. Preliminary meetings were held at the home of Sol Musicant on Pleasant Street, and by early September the group elected Julius Miller first president of the congregation. Through arrangements made with the Masonic Temple, services were held every Sunday morning with Rabbi Seligson traveling from Ventnor to officiate.

"Quarters were located later on the second floor of the Gerson Malinsky building at 110 Bellevue Ave. Isadore Banks served in the capacity of Rabbi assisted by Mark Press. Later when a desire was felt for a permanent building, a meeting was held at the home of Samuel Kapnek and a campaign launched. Hammonton Christian Clergy led by the Rev. Francis Chipp joined the campaign for a syn-



THG/MarySusan Hoffman

Claudia Tung shows some of the damage inside Temple Beth El on Bellevue Avenue.

agogue.

"Uniquely, the building was constructed from pencil sketches of Samuel Kapnek. Ground was broken on February 25, 1937, and the cornerstone was laid on April 4, 1937. The synagogue was completed on June 25, 1937 and a formal dedication held . . . the temple was remodeled in 1962," McMahon wrote in 1966.

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EDITORIALS

Help Temple Beth El

Last week, an article appeared on the front page of *The Gazette* regarding the damage done to Temple Beth El's basement following the hard rains of March. The congregation of the synagogue on Bellevue Avenue is now mounting an effort to renovate the basement as the first step to revitalizing the historic 1937 building.

Temple Beth El President Claudia Tung toured this newspaper through the problems in the basement, a place where classes are held and a kitchen area that aids with gatherings for the community. Today, there is no place to hold classes or gatherings, as the basement space appears to be in need of substantial repairs.

When the synagogue was built in the 1930s, one of the unique characteristics of the effort to construct it was the contributions of members of the Christian faiths and the community at large. In March, St. Mark's Episcopal Church opened its basement to the Temple Beth El congregation for their Seder dinner. It appears that now, in the synagogue's time of need, history may be repeating itself.

If there are churches, contractors, donors or people who feel they can help Temple Beth El, they should come together now in a volunteer effort that will help people in need. The results of that effort will not only enrich the community of Temple Beth El, but the entire community of Hammonton. It is always rewarding to be part of a renewal effort, and help our neighbors.

Those interested in helping should contact Temple Beth El President Claudia Tung at 561-7217 or (856) 767-2323. They can also visit the Temple Beth El website at www.tbenj.org.

Donations may be made out to Temple Beth El, c/o Mark Rudnick, 2413 Acorn Dr., Atco, NJ 08004.

Remember, by helping to renew Temple Beth El, we are helping renew a neighborhood, preserving our town's history and culture and providing aid to others in a time of need. It's a worthy cause. Please help.