

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

January 25, 2011 at 11:11am

Parish construction forces labyrinth removal

by Zoe Ryan

Confusion over the correct classification of a well that supplies water to a Virginia parish has led to the removal of a prayer labyrinth by the parish and an outcry from the labyrinth supporters.

St. Francis de Sales Catholic Church in Purcellville, Va., which is preparing to build a new parish center, had the labyrinth removed to comply with state regulations for a public well. But Candy Hayes, parishioner and original promoter of the labyrinth, said the labyrinth could have been saved, because the parish should have followed private well regulations.

The labyrinth was stepping stones laid out in a circular maze pattern 50 feet in diameter. It was built on land above the parish water well. The parish council approved the labyrinth in 2003.

The labyrinth had been used for walking meditation and prayer exercises by various parish members and other church groups, such as bereavement groups, prayer groups, confirmation retreats and summer bible camps, according to Hayes. It was listed on the International Labyrinth Locator.

However, it was identified as a possible well contamination risk when GeoConcepts Engineering Inc. recently reviewed the parish's plans for a future 31,000-square-foot parish center. An inspector questioned the placement of the labyrinth over the underground well, said St. Francis de Sales pastor Ronald Escalante.

A state ordinance violation in the past delayed the building of the parish center, Escalante told NCR in a telephone interview. Therefore, he wanted to take care of the labyrinth violation before it delayed plans, he said.

Construction on the new parish community center is to begin in May.

According to Escalante, the well is a public non-community well. However, the state of Virginia currently classifies it as a private well, said Robert Edelman, a district engineer at the Virginia Department of Health Office of Drinking Water.

Some churches build a private well, keeping in mind that someday it may have to meet public standards, said Loudoun County environmental health specialist Jeff Widmeyer. For example, if a daycare was built, the well would have to follow public standards.

If it were a public well, the location of the stones may have violated Virginia state regulation 12VAC5-630, which says that any structure that does not serve the water supply must be at least 50 feet away from the well.

The state was not contacted to look at the labyrinth and the well, so no one from the state could say whether the labyrinth stones were permissible or not.

Either way, the labyrinth is now gone.

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"We used it as part of St. Francis [parish] and as part of a community healing," said Hayes, a Veriditas-trained labyrinth facilitator and a parishioner of St. Francis de Sales since 1974. "It has touched a lot of lives."

Hayes led an evening prayer vigil with other labyrinth supporters Monday, Jan. 17, outside of church grounds.

"I understand how they can be attached to this labyrinth," said Escalante, who has been at the parish since 2009. Moving the structure was not an option, he added. "It's a huge labyrinth and we don't have any more church grounds."

Labyrinth Remembered at Prayer Vigil

A group of parishioners, former parishioners and non-parishioners who used the labyrinth gathered Monday, Jan. 17, for an evening prayer vigil at a cross outside of church property, said Bobbie Wilkinson, a participant in the vigil and former parishioner.

The group walked, prayed and played music at the vigil while a police officer in a squad car observed them.

Escalante said that he called the sheriff's department because he had not been informed of the nature of the events, the exact actions the group would take or where they would take place.

"It was all very beautiful," Wilkinson said about the prayer vigil. "It was not intended to be a protest. It was intended to be a gathering of people who really cared about the labyrinth and had found it to be a very meaningful, spiritual journey."

The stones of the labyrinth were removed that morning, she said. Escalante at first offered the stones to Hayes, Wilkinson said, but later rescinded his offer and kept them in the parish.

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