St. George's Organ Selection Process

As part of the process of building a new church, the Organ Committee of St. George's Episcopal Church is evaluating alternative organ solutions. The Vestry has indicated an initial budget of $350,000, additional funds may be (some already have been) raised to improve the quality of the instrument and/or provide for exposed pipes. The new Church buildings should be ready for occupancy by no later than June of 2007, and the goal is to have the organ available as soon thereafter as is feasible.

A significant number of parishioners take great pride in the music program here at St. George's and wish to ensure that the Church has a high quality instrument in order to give our Choir Director/Organ Master the means to provide us with exceptional organ music, accompany our choir and attract guest performers. As a result, we should allow for the possibility of raising additional funds to expand on the organ.

St. George's has been, and should again be, a center for beautiful music. Music represents a unique strength of the Episcopal church tradition which should help differentiate our church from others in the area. The committee believes that this tradition should be upheld with a significant investment in an organ.

We established the following requirements:

1) The cost of the instrument and installation is not to exceed the budget established by the Vestry, plus any funds we are able/permitted to raise by the time the order is placed,
2) We are to provide the most playable, versatile and best-sounding instrument for the money,
3) The console should be easily movable in order to aid in the flexible use of the modern worship space.
4) We should provide for expansion possibilities as additional funds are raised, preferably to at least 48 ranks.
5) It should be available soon after the completion of the new buildings in June of 2007.
6) We should work with the architect concerning design, placement, installation and the desirability of exposed pipes for aesthetic reasons.

The following alternatives are under consideration:

1) Negotiate with the school to buy-back our current organ.
2) Purchase another used instrument,
3) Purchase a digital instrument,
4) Purchase a new pipe organ.

Alternative 1) moving the current organ to the new location:

The current organ has limited capabilities of being expanded and is tired and worn. As-is, it falls short on providing the versatility required for more than our basic musical needs. It was originally purchased for a considerably smaller worship space (the current Parish Hall) and its bulging "umbilical cord" restricts the mobility of the console.

The instrument is a 1973 Reuter pipe organ (purchase price=$30,000), originally 15 ranks, later upgraded to 17 ranks, currently carried as $66,733 cost basis. It is in need of re-leathering, which cost $11,874 when last done about 12 years ago, as well as other maintenance and repair.

Re-leathering will probably cost at least $25,000 in current dollars.

Latest indications were that the school intended to use the organ for weddings, etc. Should they decide to sell, they will want to replace it (although possibly with a lesser instrument). As a result, we can expect to pay at least $150,000 to purchase it and spend another $50,000 on repairs and maintenance, plus additional moving/installation costs. Given the construction of the current organ loft, the move would be complicated and will very likely cause/uncover additional repairs that would need to be undertaken, both on the organ and the building.

After all these investments we will be left with an aged and inadequate instrument with very limited capacity for expansion and limited mobility of the console.

Alternative 2) another used organ:

Our research, shows that the used organs that are on the market tend to be smaller than our current organ, i.e. the organs that become available when churches trade up in size. The larger organs, whenever they become available, generally face maintenance/repair costs steep enough for their current owners to decide that replacement is a better alternative than repair. This begs the question whether this same organ could possibly be a good deal for us?

There have been examples of cases where multiple organs and parts were "cobbled together" to create a larger and more versatile organ, but there are also a number of examples where this went horribly wrong. We would be effectively buying used organ pipes, the rest of the structure would need to be built around the pipes. This would not provide the cost savings to justify the effort given the quality of the final result.

As used organs go - our current organ would probably present the better alternative, under the "devil you know..." concept. However, as mentioned above, this would not meet our requirements.

Alternative 3) a digital sampling organ:

Despite great improvements in recent years, digital organs still sound digital, even to relatively unsophisticated listeners. They just don't sound as full and intense. A small number of loudspeakers, even very large ones, is inadequate at reproducing the distinct and separate sounds nor the intense and deep bass of pipes. Also, the computers involved still have problems keeping up with the processing power required for the more complex passages and stop selections.

To our surprise, we also learned that there are a number of voicing, tuning, maintenance and obsolescence issues that can make a digital organ quite expensive to maintain and often difficult to repair. This is especially the case if corners were cut in the initial manufacturing process. Digital organs also tend to have relatively short life spans due to hardware and software obsolescence. It is rare that a digital organ will last as long as ten years, after which significant replacement costs will need to be funded. With regular maintenance, well built pipe organs should last at least 75 years.

There is a very wide price-range for digital organs, based on the quality of various ingredients (the console, the computer(s), the interface and the number and quality of amplifiers and loudspeakers). This range can be from less than $50,000 to over $300,000. The lower priced units are generally quoted when discussing how cheaply a digital organ can be obtained, ignoring the

numerous shortcomings, from life-cycle cost, to sound quality and durability.

During the attack of "Sept 11" the pipe organ of Trinity Wall street, NY, was damaged and replaced with a digital one which anecdotally cost around $300,000. It has been commented that despite the cost, it still sounds distinctly electronic. We question whether this choice would positively contribute to the beauty of our traditional service at St. George's.

This is a complicated topic, for further reference, some good overviews can be found at:
http://www.pipeorgans.com/pipe-vs-electronic/sound_of_music.cfm
http://www.pykett.org.uk/electronic_organs.htm

A description of the process that Trinity Church in Kitchener, Ontario, Canada, went through in deciding to stay with pipes can be found at:
http://nonline.net/~trinity/Pipe%20Organ%20Decision%20Info.htm

Alternative 4) a new pipe organ:

Much of the legwork in this alternative had already been done when we considered organ improvements two years ago. There are a very large number of organ builders spread all over the US. Lynn contacted the following seven builders in which he had the greatest confidence:

1) Goulding and Wood, Indianapolis, IN, http://www.gouldingandwood.com/
2) John Paul Buzard, Champagne-Urbana, IL, http://www.buzardorgans.com/
3) Cassavant, St. Hyacinth, Quebec, Canada
4) Reuter, Lawrence, KS. (Reuter is the builder of the present instrument). Http://www.reuterorgan.com/
5) Nichols & Simpson (Little Rock, AR),
6) Noack (Georgetown MA), and
7) Harrison & Harrison (Durham UK).

Only the first four responded with proposals. During this earlier process, Goulding and Wood, Buzard and Cassavant all came to St. Georges in a timely manner and made presentations to the committee and subsequently submitted proposals and pricings. Reuter was re-contacted several times and came and made a presentation to the committee and submitted a specification but no pricing. Of the three pricings, all were very close to the same. The quality of product and company reputations of the builders are also very comparable. Cassavant has a reputation of being less flexible to work with than the others.

Lynn made calls to Goulding and Wood, Buzard and Cassavant asking if they could build in our required time frame (a finished, installed product by mid 2007). Cassavant and Goulding and Wood would be able to meet that deadline, but the Buzard firm because of several organs already in progress would not be able to install before 2009.

In order to establish our place in line, should this alternative be chosen, the committee took the liberty to select a preferred supplier and make a non-binding "reservation". After reviewing several references, the committee voted unanimously to recommend the firm of Goulding and Wood and Lynn arranged for us to be "pencilled-in" on their manufacturing schedule. This schedule can be confirmed with a letter of intent and a $5,000-10,000 deposit, depending on the size

of the order.

Should the Vestry approve, we can start negotiations in consultation with the architect and acoustician on the design and size of the instrument. The last opportunity for changes or additions to the design would be early 2006.

Should this alternative be approved, given the $350,000 that is currently in the allowance to replace the organ and the potential for raising additional funds, we would like to discuss the following alternatives with Goulding and Wood:

1) to build what we can with $350,000 and plan for potential additions in the future, (Goulding and Wood has indicated that there is very little room for additions to an existing organ without having replace significant parts of the original instrument).
2) to raise the additional funds needed for the organ that was proposed originally, a total of approximately, $750,000.
3) to find out what flexibility exists in-between, with variations on additional pipe ranks and/or exposed pipes, given the funds available at the time of order and also possibly raised later.

The $350,000 alternative should provide for a 20-24 rank organ without exposed pipes. This would be a solid organ, acceptable for most our musical needs. (For comparison, organs recently purchased in our area have been averaging about 40 ranks.) On the other side of the spectrum, the additional $400,000 would buy us approximately 30 more ranks, for most of the sounds that make an organ special, as well as a beautiful display of exposed pipes for visual beauty.

Conclusion:

Given the delineated requirements and our findings on cost vs. quality above, we respectfully request that the Vestry:

1) Give us permission to pursue Alternative 4), the new organ with Goulding and Wood,
2) Fund the project at $350,000 based on the projected construction allowance and
3) Give us permission to commence at the earliest opportunity to raise additional funds for further additions/improvements, within the context of a general capital funds drive.

Because of the limitations on increasing the specifications (and future flexibility) for the organ after manufacturing has started, it would be helpful for us to be able to raise funds on relatively short order. There seems to be interest on the part of a great number of parishioners and we feel that we would be quite successful. However, we understand the desire of the Vestry for a unified campaign. We would like to work with the Vestry to find a way to address both these needs.

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