

Church shares new vision for old brewery

BY SEAN RYAN

seanryan@bizjournals.com

A small Milwaukee congregation and an environmental sustainability startup are trying to save the city of Milwaukee's oldest brewery building from demolition by restoring it as a testing ground and educational facility for green technology.

Built in 1870, the 4-acre Falk New Bavaria Brewery, of the same Falk family that founded Falk Corp., is on South 29th Street, south of Rexnord Corp.'s Menomonee Valley facility. The current owners of the property, formerly a dumping ground and auto parts yard, are trying to acquire and convert it into a facility that fits with broader city initiatives in sustainability and water technology.

The 200-member Straightway Vineyard Christian Fellowship in Milwaukee bought the brewery in 2009, said Pastor George Claudio.

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Straightway Vineyard
Christian Fellowship

Claudio said

Straightway Vineyard wants to finance the project the same way it pays for children's homes the congregation runs in India and Senegal — donations. Straightway Vineyard has spent more than \$100,000 on property taxes and cleanup on the brewery since buying it, he said.

"Everything a church does is through donations. How else are we going to get the money?" he said. "We're doing the same thing here in Milwaukee. We have no money. What we do is we share the vision with people and if it's a compelling enough vision, people join it."

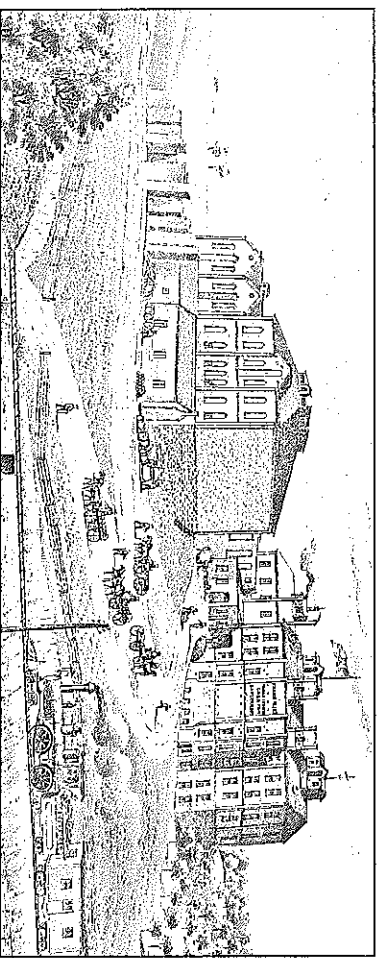
Claudio said he has until April to come up with a plan to stabilize the brewery building walls or prove that they are structurally sound. In the meantime, he is asking the Milwaukee Historic Preservation Commission to designate the brewery as historic. That request has brought attention to the long-neglected property and Straightway Vineyard's plans for it, he said.

The congregation is working with ReThink Factory, a nonprofit founded by two University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee School of Architecture & Urban Planning graduates in their late 20s who work with Sweet Water Organics and the Urban Ecology Center, for example. ReThink proposes using the brewery building as a research and educational building for green technology, said Adam Spoerri, who co-founded the group with N.J. Unaka. The ultimate goal would be to open the facility to the Milwaukee area's technical schools and colleges for education and research, he said.

Technology that could be used and tested on the property includes composting toilets, such as those used successfully in other countries, Spoerri said.

Straightway Vineyard would use the former horse stable building on the property as a space where congregations from Milwaukee's suburbs could send volunteers for educational or other work to support the community, Claudio said. It also would house Straightway Vineyard's offices and worship space, which currently are in the building at 633 S. 12th St. with the Milwaukee Academy of Excellence.

"I'm not trying to build an empire. I'm trying to improve Milwaukee," Claudio said. "If the city doesn't want it, I'll turn my guns somewhere else. I've sacrificed my salary for this."



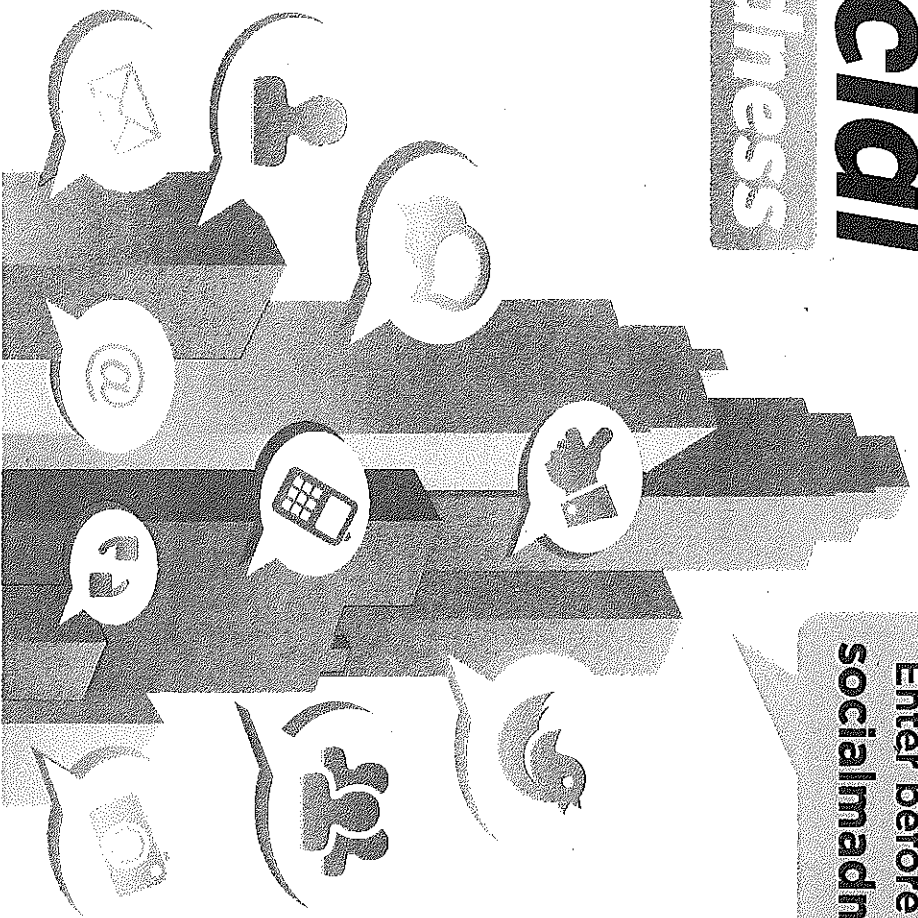
The 4-acre Falk New Bavaria Brewery, on South 29th Street, was built in 1870.

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