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Abortion clinic site for sale

Controversial building at issue

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The controversial abortion clinic near downtown Ocala is up for sale.

But that doesn't mean an end to abortions locally, one pro-life advocate says.

Dr. James Pendergraft, operator of the Ocala Women's Center and four other abortion clinics around the state, put the 6,500-square-foot building along North Pine Avenue on the market earlier this month.



Doug Engle/Star-Banner

The building that houses the abortion clinic Ocala Women's Center, at 108 N. Pine Ave., is up for sale.

Beyond trying to unload the site, Pendergraft's intentions are unclear.

The doctor, who opened the Ocala clinic in 1998, did not return calls or emails seeking comment.

Mike Warnock, an Ocala Realtor handling the sale, said Pendergraft did not disclose why he was selling.

The doctor is asking \$450,000 for the property, Warnock said.

Some abortion foes were predictably pleased with the news.

"I think a lot of us in the pro-life movement are hoping that Marion County has decided that it doesn't want that kind of presence in the community," said state Rep. Dennis Baxley, an Ocala Republican and staunch pro-life advocate.

"My first thought is that there have been a lot of prayers, right there on the street, that there would be an end to that, and I don't know of a better thing to happen,

when it comes to abortion, than to end the demand for it," he said.

"My hope is that somebody purchases that site and puts it to a more constructive use," Baxley added.

Yet Mabel Ryan, president of Life Education Ministries, a pro-life group in Ocala, cautioned her allies about being overly optimistic.

"If I put my house up for sale, I don't move out," Ryan said.

Ryan suggested that operating the Ocala clinic had finally become a financial drain for Pendergraft, who relied on sending doctors from his other clinics to Marion County.

Pendergraft's other clinics are in Orlando, Tampa and Fort Lauderdale.

Yet where Pendergraft faced a burden, someone else might see an opportunity, Ryan said.

With no other abortion clinics between Gainesville and Orlando, another doctor might find the Ocala area to be "ripe pickings," Ryan said.

"I can't imagine any other (type of) business going in there," she said. "It will probably be sold to a free-standing abortionist. He has all this business just waiting for somebody to pick it up."

Ryan also noted that Pendergraft had scaled back the hours of operation in Ocala.

But, she said, she had learned that the facility had been renovated over the summer and that the clinic would remain open to perform abortions.

An employee at the clinic confirmed that it was for sale and open its regular hours.

In fact, according to Pendergraft's website, the Ocala clinic is offering free chemically induced abortions to women in their first trimester — although those women will have to pay \$150 for the state-mandated sonogram.

If Pendergraft does eventually sell the building, it would end his long and at times hostile relationship with the community — an association that included the doctor spending a stint in federal prison.

Pendergraft was met immediately by anti-abortion protesters upon opening the facility in 1998.

A year after the clinic debuted, pro-life advocates bought the neighboring property and launched the Alpha Women's Center to counsel pregnant women about alternatives to abortion.

Regular prayer vigils and protests continue at Pendergraft's site to this day, often intensifying in January at the anniversary of the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*, in October as the Supreme Court opens its annual term and during an event called 40 Days for Life.

In December 1998, Pendergraft sued the Ocala Police Department and the Marion County Sheriff's Office for failing to adequately protect him from the alleged harassment by pro-life protesters.

Both agencies had declined to allow Pendergraft to hire off-duty officers to act as security. The lawsuit was later dismissed.

But in June 2000 a federal grand jury indicted Pendergraft and his real estate adviser, Michael Spielvogel, on conspiracy and extortion charges. The defendants were accused of falsely claiming that a county commissioner threatened them during the lawsuit.

During the criminal trial prosecutors revealed that Pendergraft offered former Marion County Commissioner Larry Cretul three deals for him to not perform abortions, including a promise to close the Ocala clinic and leave Marion County for good if the county paid him \$1 million.

Pendergraft and Spielvogel were convicted in February 2001.

Pendergraft went to federal prison. He was released in February 2002, according to the U.S. Bureau of Prisons.

Pendergraft, however, was allowed to continue his medical practice.

A spokeswoman for the state Health Department said on Friday that Pendergraft's medical license is current but in a probationary status, meaning he can practice under certain conditions.

State records show he has been sanctioned four times, most recently in 2010, when his license was suspended for a year because of a malpractice complaint.

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