



***FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE***

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**Presbytery of East Tennessee and Ijams Nature Center Announce  
Transformational Gift, New Early Nature Learning Initiative**

(KNOXVILLE, TENNESSEE, 3/18/2026) – In a historic act of generosity and shared vision, the Presbytery of East Tennessee has donated New Prospect Presbyterian Church and its surrounding property to Ijams Nature Center.

Rev. Dr. Wendy Neff, General Presbyter of the Presbytery of East Tennessee, said that when the New Prospect Presbyterian Church congregation approached the Presbytery about closing the church, she engaged with them about their legacy. They said they would love for Ijams to have the property, located at 4920 New Prospect Road in South Knoxville. Following significant discussion, Neff said the Presbytery enthusiastically approved the gift because it honors the congregation's commitment to the community and continues both the Presbytery's and the congregation's values of stewardship of creation and education.

"This gift represents our great faith in the future, in children, in education, and in the power of nature to shape lives," Neff said. "Partnering with Ijams ensures that this space will continue to serve the community in profound ways as a place of growth, stewardship, and hope for generations to come."

The nonprofit nature center plans to use the 15.7 acres of land and two buildings as the new home of the Ijams Nature Preschool and establish a new early learning center dedicated to helping educators create nature-based programs in their own communities. It also preserves 10.7 acres of diverse woodland.

This gift will allow Ijams to expand:

- Nature-based preschool education
- Partnerships
- Outdoor classrooms and experiential learning environments
- Family engagement and community-based environmental education
- Professional development for educators interested in nature-based models

"This is so much more than a new location," Leigh Feld, Ijams Nature Center's early learning director, said. "It is an opportunity to build a model for what early childhood education can be: hands-on, curiosity-driven, and grounded in the natural world."

Feld said part of the plan includes collaborating with Anderson School Head Start, which is adjacent to the New Prospect property.

“Education and nature are for everyone,” she said. “Ijams is committed to ensuring that children from all backgrounds have access to transformative outdoor learning experiences. This site will continue serving the community as a place where children can learn, explore, and grow in nature, which is critical to healthy development and lifelong well-being.”

Ijams Board President Carl Van Hoozier, Jr. emphasized the long-term vision behind the initiative.

“This gift is transformational,” Van Hoozier said. “It strengthens Ijams’ mission, expands educational access in Knoxville, and positions Ijams Nature Center as a leader in early childhood nature education in our region. We are deeply grateful to the Presbytery of East Tennessee for their trust and partnership.”

Amber Parker, Ijams president & CEO, described the moment as a milestone in the organization’s 50-year history.

“For half a century, Ijams has connected people to nature in ways that change lives,” Parker said. “Today, we take a bold step forward. This partnership allows us to create a center for early nature learning in Knoxville that integrates conservation, equity, and education. When children learn outside, climb logs, observe insects, and experience seasonal change, they build confidence, resilience, and wonder.”

The transition of the property will occur in the coming months, and phased planning and program expansion has begun. Ijams plans to share additional details about renovation timelines, enrollment growth, and community engagement opportunities as plans progress.

Founded in 1975, Ijams Nature Center is a 320-acre nonprofit educational center in the heart of Knoxville that serves visitors of all ages, stages, and abilities. Its mission is to encourage stewardship of the natural world by providing an urban greenspace for people to learn about and enjoy the outdoors through engaging experiences. Ijams features 14 miles of hiking and mixed-use trails, a public access river dock, swimming, boating, biking, and more. Hundreds of world-class educational programs and events are coordinated and offered annually. Ijams’ grounds and trails are open every day from 8:00 a.m. until dusk. For more information, visit [Ijams.org](http://Ijams.org) or call 865-577-4717.

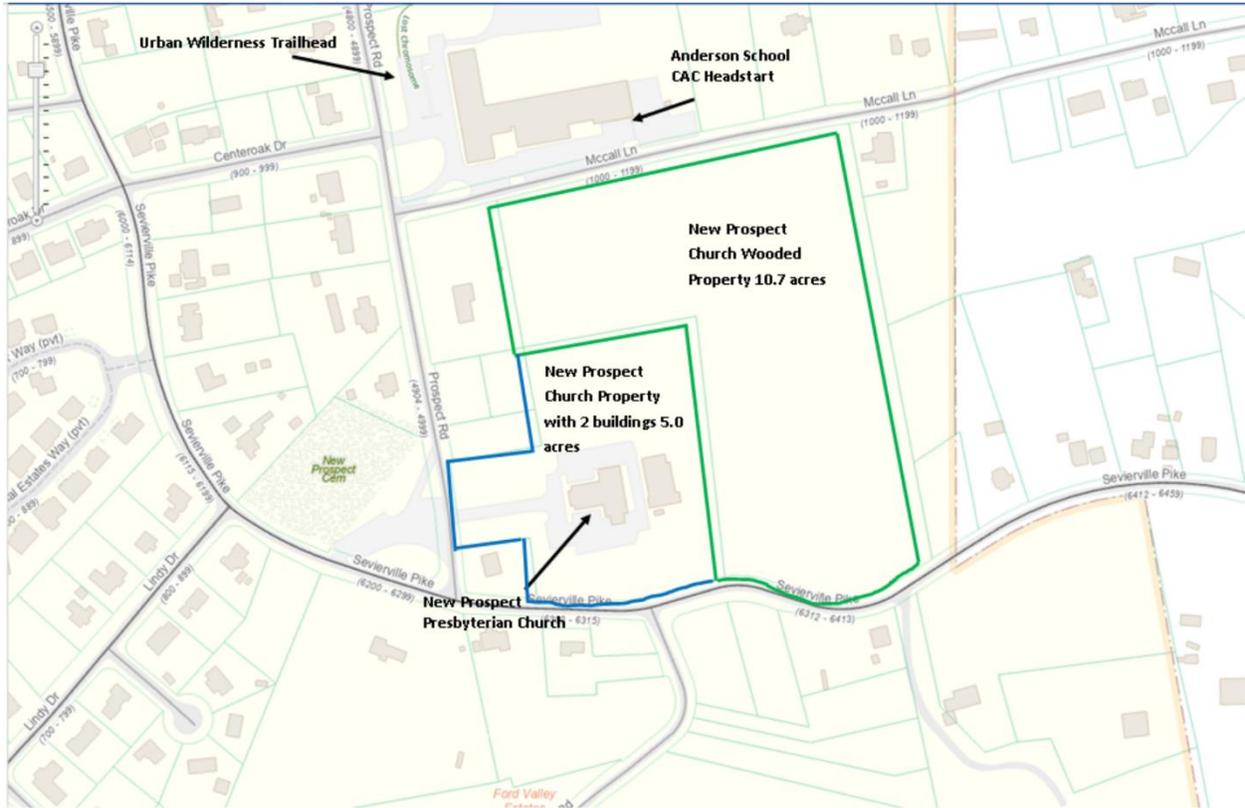
The Presbytery of East Tennessee serves Presbyterian congregations across the region and supports ministries that strengthen communities through faith, service, and stewardship.

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NOTE: Images follow on next two pages.



New Prospect Presbyterian Church Building



KGIS Map Property Outlines



Aerial View of New Prospect Presbyterian Church Property