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Just-sold church may be razed

Our Lady of Fatima targeted



Our Lady of Fatima Church at 43 Belmont St. (T&G Staff/PAUL KAPTEYN)

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WORCESTER — During its 100-year history, the granite house of worship at 43 Belmont St. has been a spiritual beacon to Roman Catholic and Lutheran congregations.

Built in 1910 to serve Swedish immigrants who settled near Lincoln Square, it was sold in the early 1950s to the Diocese of Worcester, which established Our Lady of Fatima parish to serve blue-collar Catholics living on the north side of downtown.

Closed last year, the church, which overlooks the westbound lane of Interstate 290, now faces the wrecking ball.

According to officials and documents filed with the city, the church has been sold and the new owner, unable to redevelop the structure, is seeking to raze the landmark.

Last week, 43 Belmont Street Realty Trust, which has signed a purchase and sale agreement with the diocese, asked the Worcester Historical Commission to waive the "demolition delay ordinance" that automatically prevents historic buildings from being torn down or significantly altered for one year.

With no discussion, the panel unanimously denied the request.

The church was one of several closed by Bishop Robert J. McManus during the past couple of years because of the shortage of local priests and economic factors. Its membership was merged with that of St. Bernard's on Lincoln Street.

In documents filed earlier this month with the city's Executive Office of Economic, Neighborhood and Workforce Development, officials with 43 Realty Trust said that proposed re-use of the building is not financially feasible, and demolition of the structure is the only viable alternative for redevelopment of the site.

In a memo to the commission, Edgar Luna, a planning analyst for the city, recommended that the waiver be denied, saying that the building is an architectural and historical resource.

City officials said the building has unique neo-Gothic revival architectural characteristics. He said it was one of three early 20th century churches built on the north side of Belmont Street to serve the predominantly Swedish population in the neighborhood.

They said the church is also in a highly visible location and provides "a welcoming sight" for visitors and residents.

At the commission's meeting last Thursday, Stephen F. Madaus, a lawyer representing 43 Belmont Street Realty Trust, said his client has signed a purchase and sale agreement for the church, but provided no details about possible re-use of the parcel.

Contacted yesterday by the Telegram & Gazette, Raymond L. Delisle, diocesan vice chancellor for operations, said he believed the property had been sold, but had no further information.

Deborah Packard, the executive director of Preservation Worcester, said members of her organization's board met June 9 and voted to strongly oppose the building's demolition.

She said that she had previously been told by chancery officials that closed Catholic churches would only be sold for re-use as another church.

Ms. Packard offered Preservation Worcester's help in finding a buyer who would not demolish the church.

She noted her organization was instrumental in preventing the razing of the former Chestnut Street Congregational Church, which now houses a Liberty Church congregation.

The Rev. George A. Kohl, pastor of the Belmont Street Baptist Church at 25 Belmont St., said the nearby Chinese Gospel Church, at 21 Belmont St., is interested in purchasing Our Lady of Fatima because their facility has little parking.

Representatives of the Chinese Gospel Church could not be reached for comment.

The church has been offered for sale at \$1.4 million in print and Internet real estate listings.

The building originally housed Trinity Lutheran Church, which is now located on Lancaster Street. It was bought by the diocese in 1951 to serve Catholics attending St. Bernard's, St. Paul's Cathedral and other area churches.

The church was named in remembrance of the Virgin Mary's appearance in 1917 to children in Fatima, Portugal.

The merged congregation now worshipping at St. Bernard's Church is called Our Lady of Providence Parish.

Mr. Delisle, who also serves as diocesan spokesman, said Our Lady of Fatima Church will be stripped of icons and other religious items which will be stored, sold, or given away to other congregations.