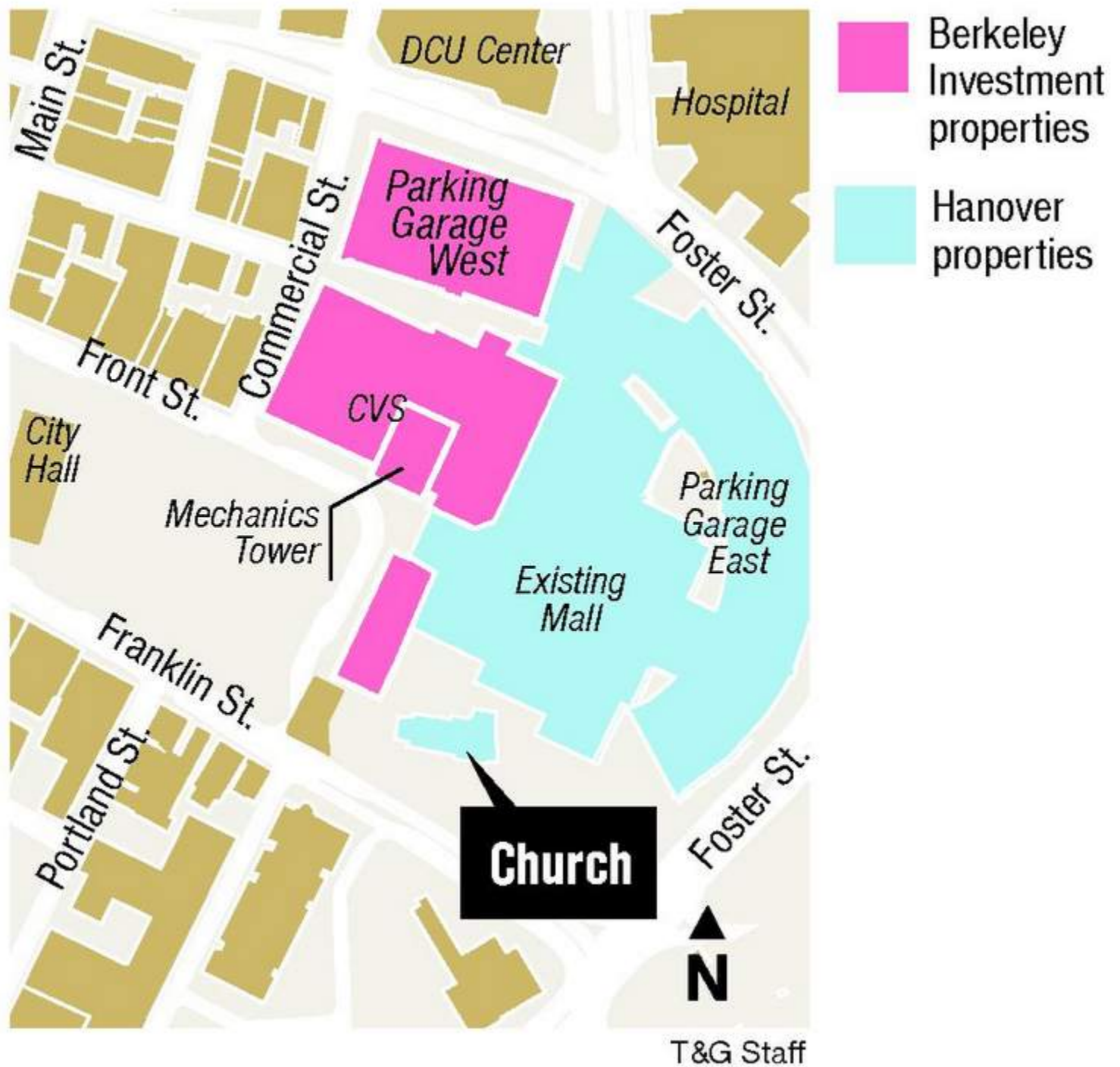


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Salvation

CitySquare developer saves Notre Dame from wrecking ball



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Notre Dame des Canadiens Church has been purchased by the developer of CitySquare.

WORCESTER — The purchase of Notre Dame des Canadiens Church by the new developer of the CitySquare project may have saved the landmark downtown church from the wrecking ball.

The Diocese of Worcester recently sold the historic church for \$875,000 to CitySquare II Development Co. LLC.

The Salem Square church — constructed to serve the city's French-Canadian population — was closed in 2007 and preservationists feared it would eventually be torn down because of the exorbitant cost to rehabilitate or retrofit the house of worship for other uses.

Michael F. Buckley, a spokesman for the developer, said there are no plans to raze the church, which has been vacant since its closing.

"I'm definitely pleased about the news," said Deborah Packard, the executive director of Preservation Worcester.

In a statement, Frederick H. Eppinger, the chief executive officer of The Hanover Insurance Group Inc., the investor in the CitySquare project, said that possible uses will be explored so that the church could be incorporated into the development.

"This will be a thoughtful process that will be managed over time, in the context of the overall process," said Mr. Eppinger, noting it was "very logical" to make the purchase, given the church's proximity to the proposed development.

Raymond L. Delisle, the diocesan spokesman, said church officials negotiating the deal were told that the developer wanted to somehow include Notre Dame into plans for the mixed use development.

"The historic architecture of the church lends itself to the beauty we anticipate seeing in the overall CitySquare project," Bishop Robert J. McManus said. "This great venture in urban renewal will blend the old with the new. It is my hope that generations to come will continue to relish the beauty of Notre Dame's exterior while enjoying an interior, which will be converted to a new purpose serving all our citizens."

Mr. Delisle said that other parties looked at the church but passed on the property, given the shape it was in.

"Congregations looking for churches want buildings that they can move right into," he said, noting that the costs to repair the church are significant.

Ms. Packard said she was surprised the diocese was able to sell the church as quickly as it did, given its condition. She estimated that it would have cost at least \$2 million to fully repair the structure.

Ms. Packard said she doesn't think the building is suitable for retail or commercial space but said it would be possible to renovate it into some kind of community center.

She suggested that a use could be tailored to attract the city's significant college population.

"They might want to consider something a bit funky, maybe a marketplace of sorts," Ms. Packard said.

Chancery officials said the deal was brokered between Msgr. Thomas J. Sullivan, diocesan chancellor, and representatives from Hanover.

"Their vision of transforming so much of Worcester's downtown is impressive," Monsignor Sullivan said. "I

am thrilled that the Diocese of Worcester is collaborating in the exciting CitySquare project through our conveyance of Notre Dame to the project.”

The two parties closed the deal on Oct. 4.

Proceeds of the sale will go to the congregation at Holy Family Parish on Hamilton Street, which had assumed Notre Dame’s assets and liabilities.

Chancery officials said the transaction was supported by the Diocesan Board of Consultors and the Diocesan Finance Committee before the bishop approved the sale.

Bishop McManus said he was glad that the church was sold to the project developer. He said it has been difficult to find congregations interested in buying vacated churches, given the shaky economy.

Notre Dame was one of the first churches shut down as part of the diocese’s long-term plan to cope with the dwindling number of priests, changing demographics and shrinking financial resources.

As with other churches sold by the diocese to non-Catholic entities, all consecrated items including the statuary, the altar, the baptismal font, and the tabernacle were removed.

Some of the items are being used in other Catholic churches. The rest are being stored at Notre Dame Cemetery, until homes are found for them.

Under the sales agreement, the stained glass windows of saints and other religious figures will be removed.

The twin spired church was constructed in 1929.

The parish itself was actually founded in 1869 and the congregation originally worshipped at an old Methodist church located nearby on the former Park Street.

The Salem Square church was threatened with demolition in the late 1960s as officials formulated plans for the Worcester Center project. Various religious and other groups, however, lobbied to save it.