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Uncertain future for Notre Dame church in downtown Worcester



The former Notre Dame des Canadiens Church. (T&G Staff/RICK CINCLAIR)

By Nick Kotsopoulos TELEGRAM & GAZETTE STAFF

WORCESTER — Ever since the developer of CitySquare bought the former Notre Dame des Canadiens Church two years ago, questions have been raised about the fate of the downtown landmark.

Those questions are being broached again now that city officials are moving to incorporate the church property as part of the CitySquare project site.

During a recent tour of CitySquare, Donald Birch, senior vice president-chief operating officer of Leggat McCall Properties LLC, said the developer (CitySquare II Development Co. LLC) has no plans at this time for reuse of the historic church building.

He emphasized, however, that the developer intends to make every effort to identify a potential suitable reuse so it can be preserved.

But one city councilor believes discussions about the future of the church may also have to include the option of razing it, because finding a suitable reuse may simply not prove feasible.

Councilor-at-Large Frederick C. Rushton, chairman of the council's Economic Development Committee, said there may be a need for a community discussion about the church's future because there will likely be "a lot of emotion" surrounding that parcel.

"As a Catholic, you look at that church and it brings back a lot of memories, and it brings back a lot of memories for generations of families, particularly French Canadians who came to Worcester," Mr. Rushton said. "But it may be necessary to have an adult conversation about the use of that property. It's ultimately (CitySquare II's) decision; they own it and what they do with it is their choice. But there may be a possibility that the church may have to go.

"Going forward, we have to realize what's in the best interest of this (CitySquare) project and if it involves bringing in the community for this discussion, I think that's a step forward. Let's not put this solely on the developer's back, but let's have the community weigh in on this and have this discussion up front."

District 4 Councilor Sarai Rivera said losing Notre Dame would be a loss to the city in more ways than one.

She urged the developer and city to work with groups like Preservation Worcester and others in coming up with a suitable reuse for the church that would be compatible with the CitySquare project.

"One thing that is amazing about Worcester is its architecture," Ms. Rivera said. "We have amazing history and buildings in this city, but unfortunately I think more and more we are losing them. Over the years, we have seen a chipping away at our history and some of the beauty that is very unique about our city. I hope the beauty of this edifice and its history is taken into consideration and we are able to preserve it as much as possible."

The twin-spired church at Salem Square was constructed in 1929 and served the city's French Canadian population until 2007 when it was closed. Three years later, the Diocese of Worcester sold the church to CitySquare II Development Co. for \$875,000.

District 2 Councilor Philip P. Palmieri said he has a lot of confidence that the developer will make every effort to make certain the church remains nearly as is. He pointed out that many former churches across the state have been preserved and turned into successful commercial ventures.

"(Notre Dame) is such a magnificent structure; the only thing second to the church is Union Station," Mr. Palmieri said. "Way back when, the naysayers wanted to demolish Union Station and look what we've been able to do with that. Demolition should not be a first step."

Councilor-at-Large Konstantina B. Lukes said, “Given that this is a historic property and would be subject to our (one-year) demolition-delay ordinance, there would have to be considerable public input on his.”