

Worcester Telegram & Gazette
Sunday, April 17, 2016

CitySquare developers say waiting to tear down Notre Dame Church is 'untenable'



Construction of a hotel and underground parking garage for the CitySquare project continues next to the People's United Bank building, center, and the former Notre Dame des Canadiens Church, left, on Front Street in Worcester. T&G File Photo/Paul Kapteyn

By Nick Kotsopoulos
Telegram & Gazette Staff

Posted Apr. 17, 2016 at 6:38 PM
Updated Apr 18, 2016 at 7:23 PM

WORCESTER - CitySquare developers have filed an application with the Historical Commission, seeking a waiver to the city's demolition delay ordinance, so they can tear down the empty Notre Dame des Canadiens Church sooner rather than later.

Leggat McCall Properties, the Boston firm overseeing the CitySquare development for CitySquare II Development Co. LLC, filed the application Friday.

While the church has long been a downtown landmark, it is not listed on the state or national registers of historical places.

But it is listed on the Massachusetts Cultural Resources Information System, making it subject to the demolition delay ordinance, which automatically puts a one-year hold on demolition requests so alternative uses for the property can be explored.

The clock on the one-year hold begins with the filing of the waiver application.

Under the ordinance, the Historical Commission can waive the one-year delay if it feels the demolition will not be detrimental to the historical or architectural resources of the city.

It can also waive the delay if the property owner can show it will result in an economic hardship.

If the Historical Commission does not approve a waiver, demolition of the church could not begin until April 15, 2017, at the earliest.

The church, located at 5 Salem Square, has been vacant since 2007 when it was closed by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Worcester.

In their application, the CitySquare developers said a one-year delay in taking the church down will lead to greater deterioration of the structure and present a potential risk to the public and surrounding buildings.

"Denial of a demolition delay waiver has the potential to impact the opening success of the adjacent hotel and residential projects, both of which are scheduled for completion in the spring of 2017," the application said.

[Demolition of the church](#) structure, site clearing and site restoration are expected to take four to five months to complete, according to the application. That time frame could be further extended depending on the prospect for material salvage.

"An imposed one-year waiting period prior to commencing demolition will be untenable for these projects, since it will result in disruptive demolition work being undertaken during a critical marketing phase for both projects, and it will further prolong the prospects of completing the CitySquare project," the application stated.

CitySquare developers have indicated that substantial efforts have been made during the past five years to seek an alternative reuse for the church, including for hotel development, a residential development and as a performing arts center.

But such uses proved either unfeasible or very costly. The estimated construction cost of the contemplated theater venue options, accommodating 350-500 seats, was more than \$27 million. In the waiver application, it was also pointed out that the church structure has no heating system, no serviceable plumbing infrastructure, and is not equipped with a fire alarm system or a fire suppression system.

In addition, the building's exterior has signs of "significant deterioration, with some of the cast stone facade elements failing and falling debris presenting a public safety hazard.