

Worcester Telegram & Gazette
April 1, 2016

CitySquare developers seek to raze Notre Dame Church in Worcester



The CitySquare development project surrounds the former Notre Dame Church in Salem Square, Worcester. T&G Staff/Rick Cinclair





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Posted Apr. 1, 2016 at 6:00 AM
Updated Apr 1, 2016 at 12:07 PM

WORCESTER - The wrecking ball is primed to swing on the landmark Notre Dame des Canadiens Church, if and when the city gives permission.

Developers of the multimillion-dollar CitySquare project said they would apply to the Worcester Building Department Friday for a permit to demolish the enormous empty edifice at 5 Salem Square that stands, deteriorating, in the footprint of their downtown development.

“It is with a great deal of reluctance that we find ourselves in this position,” said Donald W. Birch, executive vice president of Leggat McCall Properties, the Boston firm overseeing the CitySquare development.

“We’ve always said from the very beginning that our preference has been to find an appropriate adaptive reuse of the church. After five-plus years of trying, we don’t have a viable plan.”

Before a demolition permit can be issued, the city’s Historical Commission must weigh in. The commission has the power to order a year’s delay, but the developers say they will seek a waiver allowing them to proceed with the teardown sooner rather than later.

The former Notre Dame des Canadiens Church, once the grandest of four French Catholic churches in Worcester, sits vacant on the edge of the \$565 million CitySquare development that city officials hope will revitalize the urban center through an influx of 2 million square feet of commercial, retail, medical, residential and hotel space.

The church was closed in 2007 by the Diocese of Worcester, [which three years later sold the building](#) for \$875,000 to an arm of the Hanover Insurance Group that is developing CitySquare.

The CitySquare project is in full swing. Foundation work is underway on a \$90 million, 370-unit apartment complex developed by Roseland Property Co. Construction is due to begin on a \$36 million, 170-room Marriott hotel next to the church building. Landscaping is about to start above a new 550-space underground parking garage across Front Street.

“We have an active development going on around us, where we’ve got a residential project coming out of the ground (and) the hotel project due to start,” Mr. Birch said. “What we don’t want to do is become a burden to those projects.”

If the Notre Dame building is still standing when the apartments and hotel are finished it could prove a hardship, impairing their marketing, he said. Both the hotel and apartments are slated to open by spring 2017. A rendering of CitySquare shows guest rooms on the south side of the Marriott would face directly into the side of the church, wedged awkwardly next door.

It long has been unclear what was to be done with a cathedral-size church occupying a footprint of 9,000 square feet on more than an acre in the development.

Mr. Birch said conversations were held with three different hotel developers, but each concluded that converting the building to hotel use was not financially viable.

He said three ideas for repurposing the building as a performing arts center also were studied, and likewise judged not feasible. The most ambitious, to convert the church building to a 500-seat theater, would have cost more than the \$31 million spent to renovate the Hanover Theatre for the Performing Arts in 2008, he said.

Simply to restore the church to a state in which it could be considered for reuse would be an expensive proposition, he said, since the building would need to be brought up to code structurally while requiring entirely new mechanical, plumbing and electrical systems and utilities. He estimated that work alone could run more than \$8 million.

Mr. Birch was asked if any of the reuse alternatives included saving a portion of the church’s facade as an element in otherwise new construction. He said such an idea had not been considered. “To try to do something like that becomes very expensive in and of itself, depending on how much of a facade you’re trying to preserve,” he said.

“Now you’re conducting a surgical demolition procedure that is trying to preserve an element of the church. It creates a more expensive demolition process. And then the new structure that you build that would employ that salvaged component would be that much more expensive because of all the additional work involved.”

When Notre Dame des Canadiens closed, the altar, pulpit and some of the artwork went to the chapel of the mausoleum at Notre Dame Cemetery in Worcester, while stained glass windows were placed in storage in a warehouse in Connecticut, according to the Rev. Steven M. LaBaire, pastor of Holy Family Parish at St. Joseph’s Church on Grafton Hill, which inherited a painting of the Crucifixion that once hung above Notre Dame’s high altar.

However, a significant number of stained-glass windows remain in the old Notre Dame building. Mr. Birch said steps “absolutely” would be taken to save the windows, which carry the names of families and priests in whose memory they were created. “One of the things that will have to be studied before any real demolition occurs (is whether there are) elements here that are worthy of salvage,” he said. “Every attempt will be made to preserve those.”

The 87-year-old church is listed in the Massachusetts Cultural Resources Information System, and thus subject to the city's demolition-delay ordinance, which puts a one-year hold on demolition requests so alternative uses can be explored.

Mr. Birch said the developers plan to apply to the commission within the next 10 days for a demolition-delay waiver. A public hearing then would be scheduled, after which the Historical Commission would decide whether to grant the waiver, or impose the one-year delay in demolition.

The intent of a year's delay would be to give time to find alternate uses for the building, he said. "Our argument would be, we've been working at this for nearly six years and have studied multiple scenarios and have not been able to come up with a viable solution," Mr. Birch said.

The demolition of the church would free the 1.2-acre parcel on which it now stands to be marketed for commercial, retail or residential use, he said.

It appears the wrecking ball looms for the Notre Dame des Canadiens Church in downtown Worcester. Many people celebrated milestones in the majestic church. We'd like to hear from you. Please share your memories of the church. Drop us an email at submissions@telegram.com.