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Demolition delay waiver denied for Mount Carmel church

By [Tom Quinn](#) -
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Monsignor Stephen Pedone, left, and Diocese attorney Stephen Madaus listen to testimony from parishioners/Tom Quinn photo

[Read our previous coverage of Mount Carmel here.](#)

The Historical Commission voted unanimously to deny the Catholic Diocese of Worcester a waiver to a demolition delay ordinance regarding Our Lady of Mount Carmel on Mulberry Street, in a decision that dismissed the Catholic organizations' warnings of a public safety threat and economic hardship for the historic building.

After the church was closed, the Mount Carmel Preservation Society formed when a group of parishioners, skeptical of claims of a money shortage and predictions of

“carnage on 290” if “Our Lady of the Highway” was allowed to remain open, decided to fight the closing by lobbying for changes to ordinances regarding historical preservation and trying to raise money to pay for repairs.

Carmelita Bello estimated that in addition to the nearly \$2,800 collected online, the group had secured \$50,000 in pledges – promises of money that has not yet been donated but will once a way forward is identified. Even if the group does not raise the hundreds of thousands or millions of dollars the diocese says is needed, however, Bello said the Mount Carmel Preservation Society would “pursue other avenues.”

Even if parishioners raise enough money for repairs, however, the parish has said they do not have the money to sustain a congregation.

“80 to 85 percent of our parishioners are on fixed incomes. There’s only so much they can do,” Monsignor Stephen Pedone said. “A lot of our people who had lived in the area are gone. And they’re not coming back.”

Specifically, attendance at Mount Carmel has dropped from 1,875 via an unannounced “pew count” in 2002 to 456 people in 2015 by the same method. And a finance committee member estimated only 200 families out of that number contribute financially to the parish.

Opponents of the waiver also pointed to demolition costs the parish estimated at more than \$390,000 outstripped the cost to make the church safe, and that if the church had to borrow or raise money it should go to preserving the building, not tearing it down.

Mount Carmel Preservation Society representative Mauro DePasquale said the group was looking at changes in strategy and fundraising to make the parish feasible long term.

“We’re really offended to hear our parish lacks the financial resources for long-term sustainability,” DePasquale said. “We’re not just looking for a one year preservation. We really think this can be a viable parish ... this is a way to change the way our parish does business, perhaps.”

Another point of emphasis was ownership of the property by the Catholic Diocese of Worcester. Representatives of the church referenced “canon law” multiple times, claiming that Mount Carmel parish owes the Diocese money and that it owned the property separately from the overarching body. But as At-large City Councilor Moe Bergman pointed out, canon law does not apply when it comes to Worcester rules or Massachusetts regulations, and the burden of economic hardship was on the Diocese, not the individual church.

Richard Reidy, the vicar general of the Diocese, said there was no funding available to bail out Mount Carmel. The Diocese runs 98 parishes in its area of jurisdiction, and half of them are in debt to the diocese for a full dollar amount of \$7 million. The Diocese

itself itself has \$17 million in debt, according to Reidy, and pays nearly \$1 million in interest on various loans.

But in denying the waiver request, board members urged the parish to consider monetizing other properties it owned, such as a nearby recreation center, parking lots and a baseball field, ideas Diocese attorney Stephen Madaus called “pipe dreams.”

The Diocese conceded the point of the church’s historic nature and architectural value, instead focusing on economic hardship, one of the conditions that can be met for the Commission to grant a demolition delay waiver.

While the cost to make the church safe would be around \$200,000, cost estimates to permanently fix various areas of damage would be more than \$3 million, according to the parish, a number parishioners failed to reach during a capital campaign in 2008, when around \$700,000 was raised. Fixing just inside problems such as a cupula and choir loft would be around \$1.4 million, while a crumbling facade perhaps damaged by exposure to the nearby highway would increase the cost.

And the concern from the parish is not just cost. Architect George O’Neill said the building could collapse as early as “tomorrow,” at odds with a city of Worcester report that found the building to be unsafe and ordered the parish to make repairs immediately, but did not recommend closing Mulberry Street and did not say the building was at risk of an imminent collapse. O’Neill contradicted that idea.

“We still feel there is a present danger to passers-by on Mulberry Street,” O’Neill said.

Other issues, such as water leaks that become a problem in freezing winter conditions, were cited. A new one was “rosettes” falling from the ceiling. O’Neill said one of the ornamental features fell just the other day, and if it hit a parishioner it “could kill them.” Pedone pointed to those issues and asked who would be held liable for a death or injury if the board did not allow the Diocese to demolish the building.

“We’re washing our hands of this,” Pedone said, making a perhaps unintentional reference to the Biblical story of Pontius Pilate washing his hands before handing Jesus Chris over to a crowd to be crucified. “We’re telling you the building is unsafe.”

More than 100 parishioners, with a contingent of small children from baseball teams who play nearby, packed the City Hall room, in a scene that was by turns subdued and raucous. Parishioners have spoken at length about their problems with Pedone, who stressed his lifetime ties to Mount Carmel but is still seen as a villain by many.

“It breaks my heart to hear our Monsignor say he’s going to wash our hands of it,” Flo Lucci said. “We need a shepherd.”

While board members referenced the Great Recession in 2008, parish Finance Committee member Jeffrey Berthiaume said people had to face a “good taste of reality.”

“The people who are concerned about the church didn’t come forth with the help we needed” in 2008, Berthiaume said. “Many people gave 110 percent effort in trying to get money to do this church over. But as time has gone on, the membership has gone down. On a monthly basis, we’re supposed to be raising \$30,000 just to operate the church, and that’s not happening.”

While the church could come back to seek a waiver earlier than the 12 months they need to wait under the city’s demolition delay ordinance, as it stands now, the church will have to find a way to pay for immediate safety repairs to keep the building up for the next year before they will be allowed to tear it down. Parishioners, backed at the meeting by City Councilors Bergman, Kate Toomey, Candy Carlson and Gary Rosen, said they hoped to work with the parish to save the historic Italian-American building.

“I’ve never had so many people come to my office about any building,” Preservation Worcester director Deb Packard said. “And I think they deserve a chance.”