

EDITORIAL: Saving Notre Dame – Worcester and preservationists deserve opportunity to conserve 87-year-old former church

Posted Apr. 5, 2016 at 6:00 AM

Updated at 8:44 AM

It seemed like a cruel April Fool's joke, the Page One play story in Friday's Telegram & Gazette that the former Notre Dame des Canadiens Church, the most beautiful structure in downtown Worcester, is being slated for demolition to make way for the next phase of the CitySquare project. The demolition permit was filed the same day.

"It is with great reluctance that we find ourselves in this position," was the quote from a representative of the Boston firm overseeing the CitySquare development. "After five-plus years of trying, we don't have a viable plan."

Even so, the city and the people with a stake in preserving the community's heritage need to get the opportunity to try.

The majestic, albeit deteriorating cathedral-like structure sits just inside a triangle formed by three other notable Worcester buildings that wouldn't be here today but for individuals with vision who stepped in under similar circumstances. Who today doesn't walk into Union Station, Hanover Theatre, or Mechanics Hall without marveling and – if they're up on recent history – without a frisson of gratitude to those who saved these living monuments from further neglect or planned demolition, for a parking garage or other utilitarian concrete cube?

City Councilor Gary Rosen put it succinctly: "If we're going to save the Stearns Tavern, which served a lot of booze, we should probably save the Notre Dame Church that served morality and ethics." And served so magnificently in a vaulted structure of stone and light, a manifest aspiration of a vibrant French-Canadian community that also helped bring about Assumption College and to this day casts echoes in the region's numerous and mellifluous French surnames.

Councilor Rosen is filing an order requesting that the city manager and City Council join Preservation Worcester and others in attempting to save the former church, built in 1929. While some of its stained glass windows and other artifacts are in storage elsewhere, that's thin gruel in comparison to the striking edifice across the eastern end of the Common.

Sadly, its fate may have been put in motion 45 years ago as a result of the design and construction of the old Worcester Center Galleria. That former shopping center's inward-looking, brutalist approach walled-off instead of accommodated the church's graceful presence. Consequently, the church's footprint now is a tough fit with what remains of the old center —

two office buildings and parking garages — and the new construction now planned there. But it's also concerning that CitySquare has gotten this far in planning and now preparing for construction of the \$36 million, 170-room Marriott hotel just behind the former church under the assumption that Notre Dame would be demolished. How else to interpret Donald W. Birch's comment, in representing the developer, "What we don't want to do is become a burden to those projects" regarding the hotel and also a residential project. The city should have been given its chance well before it got to this point.

"We don't want to be unreasonable, but you want to make sure that every possibility is explored before taking something down," was the thought expressed yesterday by Deborah Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester. At the very least, there wouldn't be regrets over paths not taken. The city's Historical Commission can postpone demolition for up to a year while the developer works with historical groups to find another use. It's disconcerting that the developer appears ready to argue against a delay, apparently citing a hardship that would have been known well before this.

Church buildings have been rescued for a variety of uses, including high-end residences and innovation centers. One idea bubbling up is a marketplace for small retailers. The cost certainly would run into many millions; but the community deserves the opportunity to find ways to preserve this heritage in stone and glass.