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Editorial: No easy call when it comes to Notre Dame

By Walter Bird Jr.
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One of the worst decisions you can make is the one made on pure emotion.

Deciding to tear down historic Notre Dame des Canadiens Church simply because you can is not the right call. Neither, however, is steadfastly denying a developer's right to do so out of reluctance to bid farewell to a link to the past – albeit a majestic one. Hard though it may be, a decision on whether to tear down Notre Dame, smack in CitySquare, where developers just so happen to be helping the city craft a vision for the future, must be made free and clear of emotional attachment or wishful thinking.

It is hard to imagine, on a purely sentimental level, anyone wanting to tear down the church. If, however, developers — in this case, Leggat McCall Properties — can prove there is, in fact, no practical way to preserve the church, either in whole form or perhaps just its facade, without incurring significant financial burden, it may be hard to deny the firm's recent application for a waiver to the city's demolition delay ordinance.

Likewise, it could be hard to demonstrate any detrimental effects to the city's historical or architectural resources.

Either or both are reasons the Historical Commission could deny the request for a waiver.

What kind of a resource, however, has Notre Dame been in the years it has sat as a shell of itself? Yes, it is truly a sight to behold. Would that it could be preserved within the CitySquare landscape as a visual link to an architectural beauty and craftsmanship long gone by.

Yet, taking that emotional attachment out of it, what sort of a resource has the church been to the city? That will be the task of such groups as Preservation Worcester and others, who no doubt will flock to the first meeting held on the request.

Developers are already laying out their case, as told by the Telegram & Gazette's Nick Kotsopoulos, quoting from the application for a waiver. CitySquare developers say a one-year delay in tearing down the church will result in greater deterioration to the building as well as potential risk to the public and surrounding buildings.

That, too, is a case that must be proved. One could argue the church has stood as is for years without crumbling and taking out unfortunate passersby. Surely, some cost-efficient safety measures, such as netting, could be taken to prevent a catastrophe.

Ultimately, Notre Dame is likely to face the same fate seemingly facing Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church, which is likely to be closed — and ultimately demolished — because of structural deficiencies and inadequate funding. The question, then, is sooner or later?

Or can one or more groups or organizations come up with a viable plan — and the financing to enact it — to save Notre Dame from an inglorious fate?

Whatever the ultimate call, it must come from a place of reason, sound thought and rational discourse. The Historical Commission will have a tough task ahead in listening to the impassioned pleas of those who, against all odds, want to save what is truly one of the most beautiful buildings in Worcester. At the same time, members will hear from a developer who has taken on the steep challenge of sculpting from a downtown rooted in history, a future that can last several more generations. The city, even those who will plead for the life of Notre Dame church, wants this future — it needs this future.

Is it ready to let go of even the most wondrous links to its past to achieve it?