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Historical Commission scrutinizes CitySquare’s “cloak and dagger” plan to demolish Notre Dame



By Tom Quinn -
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The group developing the CitySquare project came prepared to the May 19 Historical Commission meeting with a rationale for demolishing the Notre Dame des Canadiens Church they own adjacent to the current construction. Their message was overshadowed, though, by an unwillingness to share documents, reports or anything on the record about their alleged efforts to repurpose the historic building without tearing it down. The net effect was to paint a picture of a shadowy group that board members were unwilling to take at their word.

“I don’t understand this cloak and dagger,” Historical Commission chairperson Andrew Shveda said.

Donald Birch, a principal of Leggat McCall Properties, itself the development manager for the ownership of the group developing CitySquare, said he could not divulge information the board was seeking without being authorized by various entities he declined to name.

Birch said he would be willing to walk board members through the efforts to maintain and reuse the building, but was not authorized to submit anything in writing, thus entering it into the public record, making it accessible to any member of the public.

“What we don’t want to do is fight a battle with public opinion,” Birch said at one point in the nearly two hour hearing on the item.

Leggat McCall bought the church in 2010. The Catholic Diocese of Worcester sold the building, as it had been vacant for years prior and was no longer in use as an active church. It was also in poor condition, with a deteriorating structure, something Birch stressed in his presentation. The CitySquare developers applied for a demolition delay waiver, allowing them to tear down the historic structure immediately. If it was not granted, they would have to wait 12 months before being able to raze the structure.

Birch pegged the required money to rehabilitate the building, without counting the cost of converting it to another use, at more than \$8 million, and said his client has invested \$700,000 in the building since purchasing it. But board members pointed to a lack of heating inside the building in the five years since it was purchased, and suggested CitySquare had brought economic hardship on themselves in what they called “demolition by neglect.”

Further, board members said they were not willing to take Birch at his word when he threw out facts and figures, asking for architectural reports, correspondence with various groups Birch said his client had contacted about reuse, and other documents they said were standard operating procedure when applying for a demolition waiver.

“I have never seen an applicant hesitate to provide this information,” Shveda said. “I would love to take your word for it. But I think the people of Worcester deserve better.”

The board requested documents including architectural studies, cost/benefit analyses, structural reports, environmental reports, photos of the church at the time of purchase, documents pertaining to the decision not to heat the church, correspondence our testimony from local cultural or nonprofit groups Birch said were contacted, requests for proposals, documents about historic tax credits and anything related to a proposed re-use of the property.

Birch said he might have to “sanitize” some of the information, and requested a continuance to June 30 to go back to his client and come back with more information.

Even though the meeting was postponed, a line of people including District 5 City Councilor Gary Rosen and former City Councilor Phil Palmieri spoke on the subject – some on the historic nature of the building and some on the secretive nature of the applicant’s attempt to tear down the last of five churches that once stood in the area.

“It’s an insult to the time of everyone here to show up without any of that information,” Julie Gowan said, pointing to the part of the application where Leggat McCall wrote “Not Applicable” under a section asking for many of the same documents the board asked for during the meeting.

The one year waiting period is intended to give applicants time to find an alternative to demolition. Birch also drew scorn from attendees for at one point claiming his client had done due diligence over the last five years in reaching out to local cultural and nonprofit groups to do exactly that, and at another point saying he didn't know Preservation Worcester "was a resource" and that he only met with them one month ago.

Preservation Worcester director Deb Packard said five years ago she was told there were no plans to raze the building, and that her organization only found out that plan had changed when she tried to schedule a tour of the building this year.

"We were under the assumption that something positive would come of it," Packard said.

The church is on the state Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System, but not the national register of historic places. Amy Skrzek wrote an application to put the church on the national register, but said after the meeting she can't submit it without permission from the property owner. The Massachusetts Historical Commission can override that rule, but Skrzek said they were not willing to do that when she contacted them.

Although he would not provide much documentation, Birch did let on some information about the building – most notably, that the CitySquare developers would "absolutely" be open to selling the property, which they only bought in 2010 to "control the asset." He also said multiple proposals centered around turning the church into a theater, much like what was done with the Hanover Theatre, which was similarly in disrepair and which used private investment and public tax credits to turn itself into a Worcester landmark.

But Birch said the estimate for a 350 seat theater in Notre Dame – Hanover has over 2,000 seats – was \$28 million. Although the vast majority of speakers were in favor of saving the church, Sherri Pitcher of the Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce sided with Birch in saying it was not feasible to save the building.

"We could come up with all the ideas in the world ... the economics of it just don't work," Pitcher said. The Chamber has joined with the City of Worcester as huge boosters of the CitySquare project.

Various speakers cited the Hanover, Union Station, Mechanics Hall, the Chestnut Street Church and Our Lady of Fatima as examples of successful rehab projects that were mocked as unfeasible at some point in the planning process. And the consensus was that despite Birch's desire to keep the fight out of the court of public opinion, the public would be back on June 30 to fight for the empty church.

"I don't think Notre Dame needs to be a victim of that progress," Rosen said of downtown revitalization. "It should be a part of that progress."