

Worcester Magazine
Monday, May 9, 2016

Parishioners get organized, explore options to save Mount Carmel from diocese's wrecking ball

By Tom Quinn -
May 9, 2016



Steven King file photo

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[Our Lady of Mount Carmel celebrates last Mass, mourns impending demolition](#) (5/1)

[Parishioners vow legal action to save Mount Carmel from diocese-driven demolition](#) (5/4)

[Parishioners pray for miracle as priests seek demolition delay waiver for church](#) (5/5)

As At-large City Councilor Moe Bergman put it, “there are political forces coming together” around the anticipated but still controversial closing of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic Church on Mulberry Street. The city is hosting meetings and getting a report back from a structural engineer on the church, Preservation Worcester is sending their own independent expert by in an attempt to reach a formal stance on saving the historic Italian-American meeting place, and a group of more than 80 attendees gathered

on Shrewsbury Street Monday evening to organize into committees to fundraise, rally support and ultimately save the parish.

All this after the Catholic Diocese of Worcester's architects said they could not certify the building as structurally safe, bringing an abrupt end – the last Mass was two Sundays ago – to a saga that has been dragging on for years as the parish and the community try and fail to raise money to fix a crumbling facade they say has been damaged by close proximity to I-290.

At a raucous meeting inside Seed to Stem, Carmelita Bello and Mauro DePasquale told parishioners they needed to organize to keep their beloved church open. And, no doubt stung by Monsignor Stephen Pedone's assertion that many of the people he has seen holding vigils and passing around petitions are absent when the collection basket is passed around at Sunday Mass, the night began with the organizers asking attendees to raise their hand if they were a parishioner of the Church. Nearly everyone raised their hand.

"It's not people coming out of the woodwork," DePasquale said. "It's people who go to Church, mostly ... this is the wrong church to close down."

Some of the committees formed during the meeting – communications, fundraising and others – will be helmed by interested citizens. But the legal committee has a few all-stars at the head – Bergman and Worcester Register of Deeds Anthony Vigliotti, who made a call during the meeting to refrain from emotional outbursts – of which there were a few during the meeting from the energetic crowd – to a more thoughtful, fact-based approach.

"There are so many issues here, from legal to building," Vigliotti said. "Do not shout out personal epithets or anything of that nature to individuals. It should not be focused on the individuals involved."

Parishioners have not been shy over the past few weeks about their dissatisfaction with Pedone. Some have claimed he told them the city ordered the church closed. Pedone has told reporters since the closing that was not the case, and that the diocese made the call at his recommendation after the architecture firm's findings. He has further said that he was very careful during his announcement at the last Mass to read from a prepared statement to get all the facts straight.

The city's Building Commissioner, John Kelly, also said Monday the city did not order the church closed. He did say they sent a 7-day order regarding compliance since there was failure to maintain the structure and to submit an affidavit for completed work. That order was submitted Tuesday last week, and seven business days means the deadline is Wednesday this week. Kelly said the matter could go to a housing court judge, who would then make a determination on the future of the building.

"They closed it, but they would still have to do the work," Kelly said when asked if closing the church would be enough to avoid consequences from violating the order.

Pedone and the diocese have said they want to demolish the church, and have already moved services to Our Lady of Loreto on Massasoit Road. Pedone has referenced “carnage on 290” if the church was to crumble, and said it was a matter of public safety. Kelly said the city has already sent a structural engineer to the site, and would have the results of his review back as soon as tomorrow.

Clearly anticipating more bad news from the city engineer, parishioners, led by former District 2 Councilor Phil Palmieri (who also hosted the gathering in a building he owns) called for their own independent engineer picked by the parish community to give an unbiased review and cost estimate. That role could be filled by Preservation Worcester, although Bergman, who sits on the organization’s board, said they have not been able to gain access to the building. Reached last week, Preservation Worcester director Deb Packard said she would not be able to endorse or rebut the parishioner’s plans without a review of the structure.

“Obviously, we would like to see the church remain open with the structural issues resolved and with a thriving congregation, however, without evaluating the building, we are have yet to take a formal position,” Packard said on May 5.

In addition to Bergman, District 2 Councilor Candy Mero-Carlson, At-large Councilor Kate Toomey, School Committee member Dianna Biancheria and Mayor Joe Petty have been variously spotted at events held to save the parish and advocating for action at City Hall. Bergman also referenced meetings with the City Manager and concerned parties, including the bishop of the Diocese. Asked about the situation last week, Augustus said if there was a threat to public safety caused by the building, the city would have closed nearby Mulberry Street.

“If there was the imminent threat of the thing coming down on Mulberry Street, we would do that,” Augustus said.

At the same time they are trying to verify just how bad the building’s structural failings are – a capital campaign to raise \$3 million years ago failed, and Pedone has said measures proposed by architects are not even guaranteed to save the building – parishioners are trying to mount a legal defense for the parish. In addition to civil law, the Catholic Church has a system called “canon law,” and Bello has been in contact with Brody Hale, a graduate student at Columbia University who has advised parishes on canon law in the past, on how the parishioners can mount a legal defense. Hale was not immediately available Monday night, but the argument seems to revolve around a lack of a “decree of suppression” and whether the parish owes the parishioners an appeals process.

Pedone, himself a canon lawyer, has said the group has been led astray in that respect.

“A decree of suppression has not been issued and is not appropriate in this matter because the Bishop is not suppressing the parish,” Pedone said in an email. “Canon law allows the Bishop to close a church he has determined to be in serious disrepair and a real danger to

public safety. He does not need to issue a decree in such a matter. Evidently, the canonical advice being given the group is faulty.”

In the world of civil law, Bergman, who is also a lawyer, said he did not want to get anyone’s hopes up but was optimistic about potential legal angles, and Vigliotti said the group would be able to request a copy of the deeds to the church property in addition to the recreation center land.

“The church may not be as free as it thinks it is to dispose of the property,” Bergman said.

Bergman also called for changes to the city’s demolition delay ordinance. Historic buildings are protected by a city statute that forces a waiting period of one year when someone applies to knock down a building on the Massachusetts Cultural Resource Information System historic register. Pedone has said the church will apply for a waiver, but parishioners have yet another gripe with their religious leader – the taking of what they see as holy objects out of the building before any determination has been made about its future.

“The monsignor and the bishop, as a show of good faith, should say publicly that they will stop pillaging the church,” Palmieri, who Pedone has sarcastically called “the assistant pope” in remarks to the media, said Monday.

Pedone has made it clear that, while he still wants to fix up the nearby parish center to rent it out for community events, he does not have the money to make one-time repairs, let alone a consistent revenue stream to maintain the church. The church is in debt to the diocese, and declining national Catholic Church attendance numbers have not spared Mount Carmel, which also serves as a hub for the Italian community citywide. Parishioners were incredulous at the assertion that they were not contributing enough money to the church, noting it brings in more money per week than other churches in the city. But it is also a large building near a highway and expensive to maintain, and while Diocesan spokesperson Ray Delisle said talks about paying off the debt were premature given the abrupt closing of the church, he did make note of Our Lady of Loreto’s smaller expenses.

“As a future merged parish they would have an opportunity to consolidate some expenses and get a plan in place to deal with paying down the debt, but again, this is premature to have in any detail,” Delisle said in an email last week. “I believe the presentations and discussions at the parish meetings have noted that a combined parish community could deal with debt a lot better than two separate communities. And since the Our Lady of Loreto Church is smaller and more economical to operate, it would help significantly with their operational budget.”

The fundraising committee formed by parishioners will have a ways to go to raise enough money for repairs, although a number of people asked where they could send a check that night, including Vigliotti, who pledged a couple hundreds dollars in a donation.

Discussions about online crowdfunding methods such as gofundme or Kickstarter were discussed, as well as the formation of a 501(c)(3) charitable organization. Until that point, DePasquale offered up WCCA TV, which he serves as executive director of, as the fiscal agent for the group, which named itself “Preserve Our Lady of Mount Carmel.”

Transparency around money was key for a few parishioners, who cited the lack of detail given to them by the diocese. An underlying theme of the anger with the parish and the church overall has been over the idea, hinted at but rarely verbalized, that the diocese wants to get rid of the money-sink parish and profit off the land it is on, collectively assessed at more than \$5 million by the city of Worcester.

“This will bail out the whole diocese,” one parishioner said during the meeting. “And they want it gone for that reason.”

Still, the group has not ruled out working hand in hand with the diocese to save the church building. The first vote taken was a positive vote to send a letter to the bishop asking for an open dialogue, and perhaps to have Mass at the church or the parish center until a final decision is made.

“We want to do this in a way that’s respectful and peaceful,” DePasquale, who led the group in the Catholic “Hail Mary” prayer earlier in the evening, said.

The group said they will also hold a vigil in the parking lot outside Mount Carmel every Sunday at 10 a.m. for the foreseeable future, rain or shine.