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Preservation Worcester wants all options on Notre Dame Church 'before the wrecking ball comes'



CitySquare developers gave a tour recently of the deteriorated Notre Dame des Canadiens Church in Worcester. T&G Staff/Christine Peterson

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WORCESTER - Preservation Worcester Executive Director Deborah Packard said plans by CitySquare developers to [demolish the long-vacant Notre Dame des Canadiens Church](#) took the organization slightly by surprise.

She called the decision disappointing.

“We had a tour last week of (the church) and the developer didn’t mention it, so it came as a little bit of a surprise to us, but in other respects, it wasn’t totally unexpected,” Ms. Packard said Friday morning. “We would be truly disappointed to see it demolished, because it is so highly visible in the downtown area and also was the first French Canadian Catholic Church in the city.”

Developers of the multimillion-dollar CitySquare project filed a permit with the city Friday to demolish the enormous empty edifice at 5 Salem Square that stands deteriorating in the footprint of their downtown development.

“It is with a great deal of reluctance that we find ourselves in this position,” Donald W. Birch, executive vice president of Leggat McCall Properties, the Boston firm overseeing the CitySquare development, told The Telegram & Gazette. “We’ve always said from the very beginning that our preference has been to find an appropriate adaptive reuse of the church. After five-plus years of trying, we don’t have a viable plan.”

Ms. Packard said plans to tear down the building would trigger a review under the city's demolition delay ordinance: The city Historical Commission can decide to postpone the razing for a year while developers worked with historical groups to find another use for the structure.

Ms. Packard acknowledged that finding another use for the church could be difficult.

“The best reuse for a church is another church, but that doesn’t really seem feasible for (Notre Dame), given the downtown area,” Ms. Packard said. But there were possibilities: “There have been suggestions from everything for a theater, a cultural space, a hotel lobby, somebody even emailed me about having a skate park in there.”

Mr. Birch told the Telegram & Gazette that the theater and lobby options had been judged too expensive.

Ms. Packard said Preservation Worcester was successful in saving the Chestnut Street Church, which has been subsequently sold to two church groups. She said a similar effort could, if necessary, be applied to Notre Dame.

“I think we would be interested in seeing what type of efforts the developer had put into actively trying to find a reuse,” Ms. Packard said. “We hope that if the demolition delay ordinance isn’t waived, we would put some effort for having some alternative use ... We feel strongly that we want to see that all options are explored before the wrecking ball comes.”

District 5 City Councilor Gary Rosen said he would be placing an order on the April 12 City Council agenda to “request the city manager and the City Council join Preservation Worcester and other visionary agencies and individuals, in an effort to save the Notre Dame des Canadiens Church from the wrecking ball.”

Mr. Rosen said he has no intense personal connection to the church, noting he was Jewish and had only been inside the building a couple of times. But he said he views the church as a piece of architectural art and a longtime landmark in the city's downtown, a neighborhood that is growing and attracting new residents and businesses whom Mr. Rosen said appreciate the downtown's unique character.

"I know how beautiful the building is and the architecture is," Mr. Rosen said. "We just can't walk away and say, 'Tear it down,' because once it's down it's gone forever. ... I just don't think it is time to give up on this."

Mr. Rosen also said he recognized that the more than \$8 million, which developers cited to bring the building to a state in which it could be even considered for reuse, sounded prohibitively expensive.

But he noted that a new pizza parlor on Chandler Street was reported to have cost \$3 million to build, and the city had managed to work out a deal to save Stearns Tavern.

"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," Mr. Rosen said.