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With churches facing demolition, Worcester preservation efforts under review



|Stephen Rolle, assistant chief development officer of the city's planning and regulatory board service division, and Elizabeth Rairigh, Pioneer Valley Planning Commission historic preservation planner, answer questions Thursday during a Preservation Worcester and Worcester Historical Commission presentation. T&G Staff/Steve Lanava

By Cyrus Moulton
Telegram & Gazette Staff

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WORCESTER - The crowd was primarily motivated Thursday by the proverbial elephants - or should we say, churches - in the room. But the community meeting focused more on the city's overall approach to historic preservation and how it can improve this effort in the future.

"I have a sense there are a lot of people in the room who are interested in one or two specific buildings," said Stephen S. Rolle, assistant chief development officer in the city's planning and regulatory services division. But, he said, Worcester's historic preservation efforts have been going on for 40 years. "We thought it was maybe time to look back ... and review."

The city and the Massachusetts Historical Commission began a study in November to evaluate the current historic preservation efforts and recommend possible improvements.

The city currently has three main tools to aid historic preservation: listing with the National Register of Historic Places; administering the three local historic districts - The Massachusetts Avenue, Montvale, and Crown Hill; and the demolition delay ordinance.

But Elizabeth Rairigh, a historic preservation planner with the Pioneer Valley Planning Commission who consulted on the study, said, "How preservation works in practice is not necessarily how it works on paper."

For instance, the national register primarily offers simply recognition for private residential properties, while tax incentives or grant possibilities are available for income-producing properties meeting certain criteria, Ms. Rairigh said.

The demolition delay ordinance puts a 12-month delay on demolition of historic structures to allow time to evaluate alternative uses. But Worcester and other communities have different triggers for the delay, definitions of what constitutes "demolition," definitions for what qualifies as a waiver from the ordinance, and varying lengths for the delay. Plus, if an alternative use isn't found, the demolition can proceed.

"A demolition delay creates a window of opportunity for a different outcome" Ms. Rairigh said. "It is not meant to permanently preserve buildings."

Local historic districts, however, she said, "have teeth." Their regulations can vary from district to district (design guidelines for Victorian-era homes should be different from design guidelines for a homes in 18th-century colonials, for example) and the rules and regulations in Worcester need updating, she said. Ms. Rairigh noted the regulation references materials and technologies contemporary with its written date in 1975 - and misspells 'historic' on the cover page.

The study will be completed this summer and will recommend how Worcester can amend or update its tools to reflect best and current practices. Mr. Rolle said that some recommendations may be simple changes - for instance, posting on the city's website when the demolition delay is triggered. Others may involve zoning changes, City Council approval, or more.

As for the elephants, Mr. Rolle was reluctant to answer audience questions specifically about [Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church](#) and [Notre Dame des Canadiens Church](#) - both of which risk

the wrecking ball to the dismay of some in the community. He said both are subject to the demolition delay ordinance but each case was unique and would be discussed in other municipal meetings.

Carmelita Bello, a member of the newly formed Mount Carmel Preservation Society, said she left the meeting with mixed feelings about [efforts to save her church](#).

“On one hand it gives us hope because there is a process,” Ms. Bello said. “But on the other hand, it’s daunting because there is a long list of things to do.”