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Developer interest in re-imagining Notre Dame increases as preservationists petition City Council



Renderings of a re-imagined Notre Dame/Courtesy Preservation Worcester

Read about efforts to preserve Notre Dame: [Historical Commission endorses Re-imagine Notre Dame petition](#) and [Historical Commission scrutinizes CitySquare's "cloak and dagger" plan to demolish Notre Dame](#)

Preservation Worcester and a group of civically-minded residents calling themselves "Notre Dame Re-imagined" have submitted a petition to the City Council asking them to do something to delay the demolition of the historic French Canadian church, which can be demolished as early as next month.

The petition, submitted by PW Executive Director Deb Packard, asks the Council to "urge all parties controlling the future of Notre Dame des Canadiens Church to delay its demolition for a reasonable additional period of time to allow for potential developers to pursue its development."

Notre Dame is owned by the group developing the CitySquare project in downtown Worcester. They applied to demolish the building in April 2016, but were denied by the Historical Commission, triggering a one-year waiting period that expires next month.

But PW and others imagine a future where instead of being torn down, Notre Dame benefits from and becomes part of a burgeoning renaissance in downtown Worcester, one that already features plans for multiple hotels, housing and retail spaces. The vision is based on research into possible adaptive reuses, as well as examples of success stories elsewhere in the country and in Europe.

“With a well-chosen and imaginative new use, this landmark building can become an important catalyst in the current effort to revitalize downtown Worcester,” according to the advertisement. “The combination of Notre Dame’s soaring and graceful architecture with a well-planned and exciting new use is capable of creating a magnetic public attraction and becoming an economic and tourism generator much greater than anything that could be offered by new construction on this site.”

Packard said multiple developers have come forward recently and expressed interest in buying the property. The CitySquare group has said they are willing to sell, but were unable to find a buyer since they bought the property from the Catholic Diocese of Worcester in 2010. But Historical Commission members were skeptical that the group had made a good faith effort to preserve and protect the building when they applied for the demolition delay waiver last year. The owners claimed to have invested \$700,000 in the building since purchasing it and claimed to have marketed it around to no interest, but were unwilling to provide documentation backing up either of those assertions, with a representative at one point saying that “what we don’t want to do is fight a battle with public opinion.”

But PW put the Notre Dame issue squarely in the court of public opinion, getting the building put on the “most endangered lists” of both their organization and Preservation Massachusetts, forming an online petition with close to 2,000 signatures and rallying supporters to advocate for the building. The Historical Commission endorsed a petition to save Notre Dame in January, at which point Packard said the owners “have not adhered in letter or in spirit” to the purpose of the demolition delay, which is ostensibly in place to give owners more time to find historical re-uses instead of demolition. Murmurs that the poor condition of the building was caused by “demolition by neglect,” in which a property owner intentionally abandons maintenance of a building to build a case for economic hardship – one of the conditions for a demolition waiver – were also reiterated at that time.

But Packard said in an email that the CitySquare group had responded to PW’s outreach and as of Feb. 1, had allowed them to bring developers through the building. One group took a tour this week, while another is scheduled for next week, she said. The petition to the Council is to request more time.

In PW's calculations, costs to get the building ready for leasing total nearly \$20 million, including the \$750,000 price tag to acquire it. But a pro forma written by the nonprofit organization calculates that 60 percent of that cost could be paid for by using state and federal tax credits, along with New Markets tax credits. PW has also calculated a potential rental income of \$415,000, through a combination of retail, restaurant, brewery and bookstore space.

The City Council has been asked to intervene in historic preservation efforts before, and voted in January to ask the Historical Commission to initiate a study to save Our Lady of Mount Carmel on Mulberry Street.

The advertisement ends with a plea saying that "Interested parties should contact Deborah Packard at Preservation Worcester – 508 754 8760 or deborah.packard@preservationworchester.org."