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Editorial: Can Mount Carmel be saved? - At least, there's means to possible answer

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Like the biblical Mount Carmel on which Elijah won the challenge of whose deity would rule over the Kingdom of Israel, a challenge is being waged today over the future of Worcester's Mount Carmel, in this case Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, in determining whether a treasured but seriously deteriorating sacred edifice can be saved from the wrecking ball. It's about structures versus institutions, divisions among community members who have grown up in the parish, history and declining participation in parish life that has affected many congregations.

We don't pretend to know the answer to Mount Carmel's - the building's - ultimate fate. But there's an avenue that might allow both sides to be heard in a manner more conducive to solutions than to the legally tricky upcoming public fight before the Worcester City Council over a historic district designation that's opposed by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Worcester.

The 88-year-old church, once the epicenter of Italian-American religious and cultural life here, was closed last May after the city determined its facade and bell tower presented imminent danger not just to parishioners passing under its front entrance but also to people walking and driving by on Mulberry Street.

The problem is that the cost of fixing and maintaining it has been far beyond the graying and declining parish's means, according to its pastor, Monsignor F. Stephen Pedone. "I grew up in that parish. It's painful. No bishop, no pastor wants to close the church." The immediate repairs ordered by the city to make the front safe cost up to \$200,000 and were paid by the Diocese, according to Monsignor Pedone. The true cost of repair and restoration, includes falling ceiling plaster and adornments inside, would cost millions, let alone upgrade the 1950s-era parish center. All this in a church whose attendance plunged from 1,875 in 2002 to just 456 last year. The monsignor added that only 200 families had recently been supporting the church financially. Nine years ago, a parish drive to raise \$4.6 million primarily for necessary church repairs but also a parish center upgrade raised only \$700,000.

When Mount Carmel was closed in May, the parish moved to Our Lady of Loreto on Massasoit Road, and founded by Mount Carmel. The decision has divided parish members, some of whom moved to Loreto while others seek to save and reopen Mount Carmel. The Mount Carmel Preservation Society, headed by Mauro DePasquale and including Anthony J. Vigliotti, longtime Worcester District Register of Deeds, has made entreaties to the Vatican and said it has gathered 12,000 signatures of support and raised \$130,000 in cash and pledges to pay for the immediate repairs. They have financial statements showing favorable comparisons between Mount Carmel

and other going parishes, including Loreto, and cite a plan to optimize fundraising and other revenue. Which, of course, has invited "Where have you been?" comments.

An underlying question, beyond cultural significance, is how much the Mount Carmel campus including parking lots, ball field, rectory, and cultural center - situated right by the mushrooming CitySquare development - is worth.

Members of an Italian-American community that's firmly embedded in Worcester's political structure won not just a one-year demolition delay over Diocese objections, but are proceeding with a high-stakes effort before the City Council to declare the entire campus a historic district. It would mean that nothing could be built or exteriors altered without approval of the Worcester Historical Commission.

Neither side of this controversy is talking to the other. It's time they do.

The intent of a demolition delay, according to Deborah Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester, is for breathing room to determine if there's a practical way for an owner to save or sell a historically significant structure. While hardly a neutral mediator since Preservation Worcester recommended that Mount Carmel be saved, Ms. Packard's view is that in some instances it becomes clear there's no viable solution, while in others such as Chestnut Street Congregational Church (now the Presbyterian Church of Ghana) or more recently Stearns Tavern, there are solutions. It's entirely voluntary. And both sides have indicated a willingness to talk with each other.

Ms. Packard is willing to provide a forum for an exchange. She's done this before. And she can be reached at (508) 754-8760. Is each side willing to hear out the other?