

Historical Commission kills historic district study for Mount Carmel



Susan Ceccacci of Preservation Worcester explains the historic significance of Our Lady of Mount Carmel/Tom Quinn photo

By Tom Quinn
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Read our previous coverage of the Mount Carmel preservation fight [here](#).

In a 2-3 vote, the Worcester Historical Commission ended an effort by a grassroots preservationist group to have Our Lady of Mount Carmel and the surrounding campus declared a historic district. The Catholic Diocese of Worcester closed the church in May 2016 and had been dealing with the Mount Carmel Preservation Society since that point, arguing that saving the Mulberry Street structure was not realistic.

The decision effectively kills the leverage a historic district, which requires approval before making any changes to the exterior of buildings within a defined area, would have given the preservationists. The Diocese can demolish the church in May of this year at the earliest. They could also choose to continue talks with the Worcester Business Development Corporation to find a developer willing to buy or rent some of the land, which had been used as an olive branch to MPS before the vote.

Chairperson Andrew Shveda and Commissioner Randy Bloom voted in favor of appointing the Historical Commission as a study committee to determine whether to continue along the path to form a historic district, and what the boundaries would be. Commissioners Robyn Conroy, Devon Kurtz and Mark Wambach voted against starting the study. The opposition, as articulated by Conroy, had less to do with the “drama” that had unfolded between the Diocese and preservationists and more to do with the precedent that would be set by using the historic district process as a targeted tool against a single landowner.

“I see it almost being used as a tactic ... I’m worried what will happen if someone else doesn’t want a building to come down,” Conroy said.

That thinking was in line with a letter sent submitted by Chamber of Commerce General Counsel Stu Loosemore. Chamber President and CEO Tim Murray had been a conduit in discussions to save the church via involving the WBDC and developers, and Loosemore said they were opposed to the historic district because it would disrupt what had been a level playing field.

“Taking affirmative action on this proposal would set a dangerous precedent regarding a property owner, who has in good faith, followed the laws and ordinances currently in place as set by the city and the Historic Commission,” Loosemore wrote. “... It would be similar to telling the New England Patriots, during the third quarter, they now need to gain 15 yards for a first down, when the rule was 10 yards for a first down during the first half of the game.”

The Historical Commission had already sided with MPS once, voting unanimously in June last year to deny a waiver for the one-year delay ordinance on historic properties designed to allow time for historic preservation. MPS used that time to fundraise – coming up with \$50,000 in cash and around \$130,000 in pledges, according to MPS vice president Carmelita Bello. But they also used the time to marshal political support, winning a 9-2 vote of the City Council to symbolically ask the Historical Commission to start the historic district process, making use of canon law to appeal the closing to Catholic leadership in the Vatican and eventually winning a meeting with Bishop Robert McManus and a promise to voluntarily delay demolition until January 2018 at the earliest – if MPS agreed to stop the application for a historic district.

Monsignor Stephen Pedone, the pastor of Mount Carmel and Our Lady of Loreto, which hosts services for both parishes now and will officially be merged with Mount Carmel in February, said that deal came off the table with the City Council vote, although that doesn’t mean the Diocese will automatically demolish the church. The main problem, Pedone and other church leaders said, was that it takes money to fix any building, particularly a structurally damaged church, and MPS was declaring victory with \$180,000 in cash and pledges while the Diocese’s estimates were around \$3 million.

And even if the one-time repair costs were met, it was the Diocese’s position that with declining attendance – as evidenced by “pew counts” and the failure to meet a \$3 million fundraising goal in 2007 – long-term contributions to the church were not guaranteed. MPS did produce a “sustainability plan” they had been promising, which led the outspoken priest to express his frustration with negotiating tactics he said were just a series of ultimatums.

“It took less time to produce the Iranian nuclear deal than the sustainability report,” Pedone said during the meeting.

The case made by those in favor of the historic district was that Mount Carmel was more than just a religious building – it is an architecturally significant structure and a reminder of Italian cultural heritage, serving as the gateway to Shrewsbury Street and as a Worcester landmark, easily visible from I-290, which may have caused the structural problems with the close proximity of trucks and cars.

“The building is not just handsome in itself, but serves as a physical reminder of the importance of foreign immigrants,” Susan Ceccacci of Preservation Worcester said.

There was also a sense from MPS members that although the Diocese was the legal owner of the land, the origins of the church and the money they and family members had contributed over the years gave parishioners a sense of “implied ownership.” While the Diocese blamed declining attendance and shifting demographics for their economic hardship, MPS members were more apt to blame Pedone and church leadership for mismanagement, especially in the case of the nearby recreation center, on which their sustainability plan focused.

“They have a fiduciary responsibility to make sure the pastors they placed there took care to ensure the financial integrity of the assets they were given by the parishioners,” Bello said.

MPS members had hoped to build on their efforts with tax credits and grants made available by a historic district designation. After the meeting, MPS member Elaine Bafaro said she still had hope that the Diocese would give MPS a seat at the table and would continue to negotiate a way to save the church.

“We’re disappointed ... but we still want to move forward,” Bafaro said. “We still want to work together. That hasn’t changed.”