

Worcester Telegram & Gazette  
Friday, March 24, 2017

## Owner of empty Downtown Worcester church agrees to sell



*Notre Dame des Canadiens Church in Worcester in May. T&G File Photo/Christine Hochkepple*

By [Nick Kotsopoulos](#)  
Telegram & Gazette Staff

WORCESTER – The owner of the former Notre Dame des Canadiens Church has entered into an exclusive agreement to sell the historic downtown landmark that is facing an impending date with the wrecking ball.

But CitySquare II Development Co. said it is not at liberty to identify the party at this time.

"After more than six years of active effort on our part, in addition to the prior efforts by the (Worcester) Diocese, City Square II has made the realistic and most economically feasible choice to sell the property," Pamela Jonah of CitySquare II said in a statement Friday. "We realize that there are many steps to completion of complex real estate transactions and not all agreements result in definitive sales.

"To the extent we are permitted consistent with our contractual obligations, we will continue to make the building available for viewing to parties presented by Preservation Worcester and who are sincerely interested and have the bona fide financial expert wherewithal, the experience and the commitment to undertake a project of this magnitude," she added.

Meanwhile, Preservation Worcester is asking all parties controlling the future of the church to delay its demolition.

In a petition filed with the City Council, Deborah Packard, on behalf of Preservation Worcester and the Re-Imagine Notre Dame Committee, is appealing to have the demolition delayed a "reasonable period of time" to allow for potential developers to pursue its reuse.

She said since February several developers have expressed interest in redeveloping the church.

The one-year demolition delay for the church, located at 5 Salem Square, expires April 15.

After that time, the church can be razed without the need of any city approvals.

Ms. Packard is asking the City Council Tuesday night to support the call to delay the demolition.

"Our hope is to get the city of Worcester behind us in support of convincing the owner to delay demolition and allow us more time to work with interested developers," Ms. Packard said. "Some developers we have spoken with have demonstrated interest in the building.

"Now we need time to build on that interest and put together a plan," she added. "We were only first allowed to bring developers into the building in February of this year, so we have been given very little time to put together a development package. We need more time to make this work."

Notre Dame Church, which has been vacant since 2007, is in the CitySquare development area.

Located just off the east end of the Common, Notre Dame Church, with its two spires, has long been a landmark to the downtown landscape.

CitySquare II petitioned the Historical Commission last year for a waiver to the city's demolition delay ordinance, which automatically puts a one-year hold on the demolition of historic buildings.

More Video: Lawyer for Jose Melendez speaks after arraignment in Worcester

But the Historical Commission unanimously rejected the request for a waiver, saying the razing of the church would be detrimental to the historical and architectural resources of the city.

While the church is not listed on the state or national registers of historic places, it is listed on the Massachusetts Cultural Resources Information System. That made the church, which was built in 1929, subject to the city's demolition delay ordinance.

Ms. Packard said Notre Dame Church is historically significant to Worcester and enhances the beauty of its downtown. It served for three-quarters of a century as the epicenter of Worcester's once large French-Canadian community.

Ms. Jonah said CitySquare II spent a considerable amount of time with Preservation Worcester, including touring the property in March 2016 and this past February and reviewing all of its exhaustive efforts to preserve the church.

She said significant time and money were expended with potential developers, architects, preservation experts, attorneys and others on the church.

"Our efforts over many years were well known throughout the city," Ms. Jonah said. "Although there were many parties with ideas who expressed interest, none proved to be economically feasible and backed by a developer or an investor.

"People have come up with great uses for the space and we appreciate that Preservation Worcester has yet another idea for the space," she added. "But it is just that — an idea that is in the form of a marketing proposal presented at the 11th hour without a developer or investor willing to make the financial commitment."

In a 13-page development package Preservation Worcester has prepared for Notre Dame Church, it pointed out that the building would qualify for National Register and, therefore, could be eligible for state and federal historic tax credits.

The development package states that there are 12,500 gross square feet in the building's main floor, with another 11,500 gross square feet in its basement, which also has a stage. It said there are another 4,000 square feet of space for a possible mezzanine and the potential exists for an addition of up to 18,000 square feet in size.

Preservation Worcester also cited several examples where historic churches across the country have been preserved and adapted for new uses.

Ms. Jonah said endeavors to restore and re-purpose the Notre Dame des Canadiens Church date back to at least 2008 when the Worcester Diocese closed the building. She said the diocese actively solicited ideas and proposals back then, and Preservation Worcester was very familiar with the church's poor condition, as well as its potential.

"Make no mistake," she said, "CitySquare bought the property in 2010 with the bona fide intention of saving the church and redeveloping it if it were economically viable. The church's closure and the desire by the diocese were well known, but we were the one and only party to step forward and actually invest in the church's potential.

"Moreover, due to the condition of the building, its design and other factors, at this point we were left with just three realistic options: leave the building to deteriorate further behind its chain link fence, with no realistic expectation of its reincarnation; clear the land and replace it with something suitable for the location that would enhance the city and City Square; or sell the property 'as is'."