

MassLive.com
Wednesday, January 11, 2017

Time running out as groups hoping to save historic Notre Dame church say developer shut them out

By [Alban Murtishi, MassLive.com](#)

on January 11, 2017 at 8:58 AM

As time runs out for advocates seeking to save a historic church in Worcester, a group on the forefront of the battle to save the structure says developers have shut them out.

Preservation Worcester is accusing CitySquare II LLC of being unresponsive in the group's attempts to meet and discuss alternative uses for the structure, which could see the wrecking ball as early as April. Meanwhile, developers have responded saying preservationists and the city's Historical Commission have been unprofessional and have not been collaborative or open.

The fate of the Notre Dame des Canadiens Church has been in limbo after the city's Historical Commission placed a one-year delay waiver on the church's demolition. The waiver expires in April.

The church, once a vital part of city's French Canadian community, was closed by the Diocese of Worcester in 2007 and sold for \$875,000 to CitySquare II LLC, an arm of Hanover Insurance that is heavily involved in revitalizing the downtown. It sits on the edge of the CitySquare development, where 365 new luxury apartments and retail space in the heart of the city's downtown are now under construction. After five years and a reported \$700,000 spent unsuccessfully looking for alternative uses for the church, the developer wants to tear it down.

The one-year delay is supposed to allow developers and interested parties the chance to discuss alternate uses for the property, but Preservation Worcester members say that property owner City Square II Development LLC and property management company Leggat McCall Properties of Boston have not been open to discussions.

"The property owner, including the developer that owns the land, has not shared information with Preservation Worcester or with the Worcester Historical Commission," said Deborah Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester. "We've spent a great deal of time preparing to meet with them ... and they have chosen not to meet with us as a group."

Preservation Worcester, a historic property advocacy group, has named the Notre Dame Church as the most endangered building in the city. It has been at the forefront of the coalition group

behind the Reimagine Notre Dame Church movement, which is pushing to find a new use for the building.

That movement gained another ally last week after the Worcester Historical Commission unanimously pledged its support for the [Re-imagine Notre Dame](#) petition.

As of Wednesday morning, the petition garnered more than 1,138 signatures. But time is running out.

The group has been meeting for four months, speaking with outside developers and prospective tenants, and conducting research on alternate uses for the church.

But Historical Commission members remarked during last week's meeting that developers have not been transparent about the state of the building.

'They said they did this work but they never showed it to us.' -Andrew Shveda

"I deeply question what the state of the building is, I still believe the applicant misrepresented the state of the building," Andrew Shveda, chairman of the Historical Commission, said. "We were not given any engineer reports, we did not speak to an architect who looked at the building ... They said they did this work but they never showed it to us, so I have to question whether or not the work was even done."

CitySquare II developers contend that they took every opportunity to be transparent about the state of the Notre Dame church.

The group has been a powerful ally to the city, contributing to numerous development projects that have been the keystones of [Worcester's renaissance](#), including development of the Hanover Theatre for the Performing Arts.

As Preservation Worcester pushes to reimagine the Notre Dame des Canadiens Church in downtown Worcester, saving it from demolition and repurposing the structure, the building's owners say other uses for the church were deemed unsuccessful in more than five years of research.

According to a Building Demolition Delay Waiver Application submitted to the city on April 15 for Notre Dame, the developers failed to find alternate uses for the church property.

"Our application and presentation to the historical commission was thorough and complete. We fully met the requirements of the application, presented details and support at the commission meeting, and respectfully responded to questions," Pamela Jonah, a CitySquare II spokesman wrote in a statement.

They argue that the information the Historical Commission requested went beyond what is expected during the application process. Some of that information would have breached certain non-disclosure agreements with outside developers, Jonah said.

The recent comments by Preservation Worcester and the Historical Commission regarding CitySquare II's transparency and ethics have left the group feeling slighted.

"We have been disappointed by the commission's tone throughout the process. Neither the commission nor Preservation Worcester have been open, professional or collaborative," Jonah wrote. "Frankly, we are dismayed by the treatment we have received, particularly in light of the role we have played in Worcester development over the past several years. We certainly have not been treated as the partner we have been to the city."

Notre Dame was the heart of the French Canadian community in Worcester, Packard said. It was once one of five churches on the Common. It is now the only one left.

"The architecture, the craftsmanship of that church is beautiful," she said. "We feel like the older architecture and newer architecture really make a building vibrant. We firmly feel that there could be a new purpose for that building that could be a real revitalizer for economic development and tourism."