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Worcester City Council seeks demo delay for Notre Dame

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Notre Dame des Canadiens Church. T&G File Photo

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WORCESTER — In the hope of buying some additional time for the former Notre Dame des Canadiens Church, the City Council has appealed to all parties controlling the future of the church to delay its demolition to see if realistic reuse plans can be put together for the downtown landmark.

With the one-year demolition delay for the church, located at 5 Salem Square, set to expire April 15, Preservation Worcester and the Re-Imagine Notre Dame Committee asked for more time so they could have more time to work with interested developers.

Deborah Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester, said her group has reached out to 12 potential developers and several have expressed interest in redeveloping the church, but more time is needed to work with them.

"We really feel that great cities don't destroy (historic) buildings, rather they cherish them," Ms. Packard said. "There is no downside to supporting more time."

While the City Council has no legal authority to extend the demolition delay, city councilors Tuesday night said their support for the nonbinding resolution brought forward by the two groups sends a strong message that they are not going to forsake the city's past.

"Sometimes we have to pay a price for progress and that is destroying our past," said Councilor-at-Large Konstantina B. Lukes. "We don't want to do that. Our buildings are public art and new buildings are not a substitute for older buildings."

Mayor Joseph M. Petty said there probably isn't one person in the city who wants to see the church demolished. He called it an "architectural gem" and said it is a building he would like to see remaining standing.

He said CitySquare II took a big chance when it bought the church several years ago and he firmly believes it's main goal was to preserve the building, but was unable to find a way to make it work.

District 5 Councilor Gary Rosen said he hopes all the parties involved with the church will agree to extend the demolition delay deadline by six months.

He said Notre Dame, which has been vacant since 2007, is still standing because of efforts made by CitySquare II Development Co., the owner of the church, to try and find a reuse for it.

Mr. Rosen said while he appreciates the efforts of CitySquare II, he said it is possible that other developers Preservation Worcester he has been in contact with may be able to develop plans that can work.

"All we're asking for is more time," he said. "If Preservation Worcester can't come up with anything after six months, then it might be time to let it go."

CitySquare II purchased the church from the Worcester Diocese in 2010.

While Notre Dame is not listed on the state or national register 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.

CitySquare II petitioned the Historical Commission last year for a waiver to the one-year demolition delay, but the commission unanimously rejected the waiver request.

In a letter to city councilors, Donald Birch, manager for CitySquare II, said the ownership group has been attentive and responsive to input from the community from the beginning.

He said the property was purchased with the bona fide intention to preserve it.

"CitySquare II has made an exceptional effort to find new life for this building," Mr. Birch wrote. "In fact, it is the only party to step up to the plate and try to make something happen.

"Honestly, any viable proposal to preserve the structure from a credible sponsor with expertise and financial resources would have been eagerly embraced," he added. "But, of course, that has not materialized. Ideas and interest have been abundant; it's commitment that has been scarce. Unfortunately, the building was, and remains, in a condition which makes reclamation extraordinarily expensive."

Mr. Birch said CitySquare II has entered into an exclusive agreement to sell the church, as its potential date with the wrecking ball nears. He said a confidentiality agreement prohibits CitySquare II from disclosing the potential buyer for the property.

He added, however, that his group has told Preservation Worcester that it will continue to make the property available for further examination and study.

Some three dozen people testified before the council Tuesday night in support of preserving the church.

While CitySquare II is looking to sell the church, some people expressed concern that a new owner might conceivably go forward with plans to raze the church before discussing its future with Preservation Worcester or the Re-Imagine Notre Dame Committee.

Andrew Shveda, who is chairman of the Historical Commission, said he fears talk about selling the church is nothing more than a ruse to distract public attention from the owner's failure to abide by the intent of the city's demolition delay ordinance.

But Mr. Birch said CitySquare II has come to the "regrettable, but inevitable, conclusion" to sell it as it given the condition and many issues associated with the building.

State Rep. Mary Keefe, D-Worcester, meanwhile, questioned the rush to demolish the church since no plans are in place as to what will go there.

"Notre Dame not only helps to tell the story of who we were, but who we are today," she said.