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## **As I See It: Notre Dame: Can landmark be saved?**

By Rob Para Jr.

Efforts are underway to revitalize downtown Worcester – to find profitable new lives for underused buildings, put pedestrians on the streets, create an iconic civic image, and make the heart of the city a “destination.” Now under construction are downtown market rate housing, two hotels, and a hockey rink – all expected to help bring 18- to 24-hour life to the city center. The future opening of the Blackstone Heritage Corridor Visitors’ Center will also bring visitors from far and wide. Heritage tourism is a moneymaker. Heritage tourists stay longer, spend dollars on hotels, car rentals, restaurants, and retail purchases. Things are looking up!

Yet, counterintuitive to this revitalization effort is the fact that, upon the expiration of the city’s demolition delay order in April, Notre Dame des Canadiens Church overlooking Worcester Common can be demolished. If that happens, an important historical landmark will be snatched from our midst, diminishing the rich urban character of the heart of the city.

Although there may be a pending sale, there is no confirmation of the fate of the building if the sale proceeds. Imagine the site of Notre Dame as a vacant lot. Imagine Church Street with no church. Think of the forlorn look that vacant lots have created on the north end of Main Street. Or, even worse, imagine the Notre Dame site transformed as the home of a box store or some utilitarian building built simply as space filler – a throw-away building to be demolished in thirty years when it comes due for a fix-up. Don’t we owe ourselves better than that?

We cannot attract people downtown if we demolish the historical buildings that make Worcester special and distinguish it from “Anywhere USA.” Our historical buildings tell our story and add variety and visual richness to our streets. Will heritage tourists bother to stay to eat or spend the night in Worcester when they find that our city has little charm?

It is a fact that historical buildings play a key role in downtown revitalization efforts and in increasing tourism. Old buildings provide settings that are out of the ordinary. They offer unique spaces and high quality materials, craftsmanship, and architectural features that new buildings cannot afford to offer. Historic buildings create for us experiences that are attractions in themselves. Walk under the soaring arch at the main entrance to Notre Dame and your spirit soars. When given a well-planned, imaginative new use, Notre Dame can become not only a key attraction in itself, but a catalyst to surrounding

development, as well. Quincy Market in Boston and Crompton Place in our own Canal District are examples of this spin-off effect.

Church buildings, both in the United States and abroad, have been adapted for a wide variety of uses. Some of the most successful have been breweries and restaurants. But others are lively markets and commercial centers, book stores, residential apartments, concert halls, museums, and rock-climbing and skateboard centers. Part of what has made businesses in historic buildings successful is the buildings themselves. Put the same enterprise in a new building and it will not have the same attraction.

More Video: St. John's coach Charlie Eppinger said pitcher Ian Seymour looked sharp making his return after not pitching most of last season with an injury.

How can we dream of revitalizing downtown without assigning to Notre Dame a key role as a catalyst? It is a monumental building and one of our most outstanding downtown landmarks. It is a mistake to measure the feasibility of rehabilitating a historic building on immediate cost alone. We must take into account the exceptional long-term economic, historic, and cultural value of the reused structure – the power it has to attract the public, to create sense of place and local pride, and, thus, to stimulate the economy.

To stave off demolition, a volunteer Notre Dame Committee is working to identify creative uses for the building and to find an interested and qualified developer. Composed of architects, engineers, preservationists, lawyers, educators, business people, and concerned citizens, the committee has made valuable contacts. The group recently received the support of the Worcester City Council for a non-binding petition urging all parties controlling the future of Notre Dame des Canadiens Church to delay its demolition for a reasonable additional period of time to allow for potential developers to pursue its development. We fear the demolition delay order will expire before there is time to assemble a satisfactory reuse project.

Demolition looms. Once a building is gone, it's gone forever. Considering the past year's improved development climate in Worcester, let's not rush to demolition – let's not throw away the chance to make Notre Dame a transformative centerpiece to downtown revitalization.

*- Rob Para Jr., of Westboro, is president of the Board of Directors of Preservation Worcester.*