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EDITORIAL: Lessons of Worcester's preservation challenge

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That there's a national debate underway over destroying versus preserving monuments of a different sort is a bit of coincidental irony in looking at Worcester's two, much bigger monuments with very uncertain futures of their own.

Notre Dame des Canadiens Church and Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church, just over two city blocks from each other with I-290 running between them, encompassed in stone the spiritual and communal aspirations of two of Worcester's many immigrant communities, French-Canadian in one and Italian in the other, and now sit abandoned, their uncertain tomorrows lingering in the air, subject of efforts to preserve them against difficult odds.

Let's be clear that no one on any side of these issues is happy about the prospect that either of these community icons might be taken down. After all, regarding Notre Dame, it would have been far less costly, and easier, to tear down the building the same time the mall that grew next to it came down.

Mount Carmel, a going parish until it closed in May 2016 as part of a parish merger because of its crumbling condition and declining attendance, has an active group of parishioners and former parishioners fighting to preserve it. They've won a stay, of sorts, in taking their appeal all the way to the Vatican. Notre Dame, on the other hand, has been vacant for nine years. Its battles are being fought by preservationists hoping to restore the soaring but deteriorating edifice, architecturally the most notable building in downtown Worcester, and resurrect it for new purposes. No potential savior, as it were, has yet appeared with a plan and the means to save it, although Preservation Worcester continues in its attempts to find prospects willing to take the risk. The sale of the former church building by CitySquare II to Roseland Residential Trust hasn't yet closed, although it is under agreement and the Planning Board has approved plans for a mixed-use apartment development in which the board and the coming owner discussed incorporating elements of the church in the new building that would replace it.

Notre Dame's problem, beyond its deterioration, is the very soaring structure that sets it apart. A smaller church on the site – say, like Mount Carmel – might have presented a less daunting challenge.

Whatever the ultimate outcomes, there are lessons here for the entire community.

First, as we've said before, a preservation process that waits for an owner to file a demolition permit that starts a one-year clock to see if the property owner and community interests might agree on a way to save a structure is too little and far too late.

Whether or not a property owner has explored other avenues, there's a level of urgency to filing for a demolition permit. Yes, it's better than what happened 21 years ago when a 140-year-old Main Street building was demolished virtually overnight in hopes it would become the site of a new courthouse – it's still a vacant lot, used for parking, across the street from where the courthouse was eventually built. But if anyone is thinking that “at least we had a year to try,” they're not thinking far enough ahead. Look how long it took for a developer to materialize with a feasible plan for the old Lincoln Square courthouse. Good thing it wasn't privately owned.

Rather than wait for owners to file for a permit to demolish a building they've given up on, the city should take the initiative to start a process to inventory not only its historic properties but also potential future prospects. Such an inventory should include their current state of repair, historic and architectural significance, and potential for future development. For instance, such an inventory, would have identified that, for whatever reason, historically and architecturally significant churches were being allowed to fall into disrepair, endangering future prospects for rescue. Such an inventory would then allow additional time for the city and preservation groups to work with willing owners over a longer period toward outcomes that could benefit owners with any interest they might have in preserving, or developing, or potentially selling their property.

A process such as this, presumably, would have ranked Notre Dame high on an endangered list years ago. It could have spurred ideas and potentially found developers who, even if the church really was crumbling when it closed, would not have had to deal with an additional nine years' deterioration. Certainly, development prospects are subject not just to someone having a vision but especially to market conditions. But at least such a process would bring with it the benefit of more time - currently limited to a 12-month extension after an owner has apparently already made the decision to demolish a building.

It would also give the city and community an opportunity to agree on priorities. Worcester Regional Chamber of Commerce President Timothy P. Murray has noted in the past that at one point, properties including the former Boys Club, Worcester Memorial Auditorium and the former courthouse, all at Lincoln Square, plus the two churches, would have required \$100 million – far more than any state or federal credits would be available to accommodate.

One view that has crept into the conversation, particularly about former church buildings such as Notre Dame, is that once deconsecrated they've lost their spiritual *raison d'être*, their soul, as if it were better to tear them down. The fact that a community would go to all the trouble of saving a building because of its inherent beauty *and* historical significance stands for something. After all, what might they say in England if someone put forward that it would be better to tear down Stonehenge, since it no longer serves its original purpose.