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Preservationists decry plans for Notre Dame church site

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WORCESTER - Preservationists say they'll continue their campaign to save the landmark Notre Dame des Canadiens Church building downtown, which a developer proposes to demolish and replace with upscale apartments.



“It’s not over till it’s over,” says Deborah Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester, a nonprofit that would prefer to see the cathedral-sized building in the heart of the CitySquare development repurposed as a venue for arts and entertainment, shops and a farmers market.

Whether the save-the-church advocates will succeed in their eleventh-hour effort remains to be seen.

Roseland Residential Trust, which is constructing 365 luxury apartments next door to the vacant church building as part of the multimillion-dollar CitySquare project, proposes to knock down the old church and put 84 more apartments plus retail space there.

The Planning Board on Aug. 2 is scheduled to take up Roseland's site plan application.

Notre Dame occupies a footprint of 9,000 square feet on more than one acre in the midst of the CitySquare development. The vacant church now is hemmed in by the \$90 million apartment complex, 145 Front at City Square, rising next door, as well as by the \$36 million, 170-room Marriott hotel being built mere feet away.

The enormous Romanesque Revival-style church, built in 1929, once was the mother church of the French-Canadian Catholic community in Worcester. The Diocese of Worcester closed it in 2008 and sold it two years later to the CitySquare developer for \$875,000.

The Notre Dame property at Salem Square still is owned by CitySquare II Development Co. LLC, an arm of Hanover Insurance Group.

But Roseland was authorized by Leggat McCall Properties, the Boston firm overseeing the CitySquare development, to file the definitive site plan for the Notre Dame property. This would indicate Roseland has an option to purchase the former church if the Planning Board approves the construction plan.

It was announced months ago the church property was under agreement to be sold, but the prospective buyer had not been identified.

A year's demolition delay imposed under a local historic preservation ordinance expired in April, which means the wrecking ball can swing at any time.

In a statement released Tuesday, Ilene Jablonski, Roseland's senior vice president of marketing, said: "Roseland submitted a plan for a mixed-use development, including both multi-family and retail. Over the past few years, other uses for the property have not come to fruition, and we are pleased to see our proposal under agreement and moving forward.

"We are excited to have this project become part of our 145 Front at City Square development and continue to grow Worcester's future economic growth."

Preservationists said they will press on.

"Until there would be a demolition, we'll continue to try and work on a plan that works for the city and works for CitySquare," Ms. Packard said. "We have examples of churches that have been repurposed from around the world. We think there are amenities that could complement the apartments and the development downtown."

Ms. Packard is part of a group called Re-Imagine Notre Dame that has been meeting for more than a year, weekly the past six months, seeking ways to save and repurpose the closed church. They have proposed converting the old church into a multipurpose venue that could host art exhibits, shops and a public market while serving as a cultural anchor for downtown.

Last spring the group and Preservation Worcester announced they had identified a prospective buyer prepared to make an offer for the church building, but Leggat McCall said negotiations already were underway with the current purchaser.

Denis Kennedy, an assistant professor of political science at the College of the Holy Cross who is on the board of Preservation Worcester and is a member of Re-Imagine Notre Dame, said he has seen a public groundswell for preserving the former church.

“I’d expect to see on Aug. 2 a pretty big contingent of people coming to the Planning Board meeting and speaking out about this,” Mr. Kennedy said.

“This has certainly awakened the general public and it does point to the fact there are quite a lot of people in Worcester who don’t want to see a building like this destroyed,” he said.

“Whether we save or whether we lose this building, serious conversations need to be had, because if you look at Worcester, you really do have far too many vacant lots and parking lots where once there were magnificent structures.

“This is a really good case in point. You look at the structure that is proposed to be built here. What is interesting about that? It’s a beige box, disposable construction. I’m certainly happy to see density downtown - a lot of us are. But what is the architectural value of that?

“It’s so easy to tear things down, but we’re not replacing them with buildings of particularly high quality or of architectural value (that) are going to compel people to actually move to downtown Worcester or visit downtown Worcester.

“Whether we save this building or not, and I certainly hope that we can, perhaps this will be a catalyzing force for people to say, ‘Enough is enough.’ ”

Elaine Gardella of Worcester, a member of the board of Preservation Worcester and of Re-Imagine Notre Dame, said saving the church building as a public market and entertainment venue would enhance architectural diversity downtown while boosting economic development and - at the same time - the value of apartments being built next door.

“Downtown did need renovating,” Ms. Gardella said. “At the same time, could we do something in our power to preserve Worcester’s past - and one of (the) most beautiful buildings that Worcester has?”