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Deal for Notre Dame church collapses



Workers on a roof area beneath the spires of Notre Dame Church [T&G File Photo/Christine Peterson]

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WORCESTER – A deadline to close a purchase and sales agreement on the Notre Dame des Canadiens church passed Friday without a deal, but the historic downtown landmark is still slated for demolition.

CitySquare II, the Hanover Insurance-backed entity orchestrating the redevelopment of the 22-acre portion of downtown known as CitySquare, said Friday it now plans to demolish the 5 Salem Square building itself prior to a city imposed deadline of April 15, 2018.

“In the interest of ensuring the continued success of the CitySquare project, CitySquare II intends to move forward with demolition of the structure prior to the April 15, 2018 demolition deadline pursuant to the Historic Building Demolition Waiver Determination,” CitySquare II spokeswoman Pamela Jonah wrote in a statement. “This action will enable the parcel to be unencumbered by the structure and, therefore, be more marketable.”

CitySquare II and Roseland Residential Trust, A New Jersey company that intended to raze the church for apartments, have been working to close a purchase and sales agreement for months. Ms. Jonah said Roseland had been granted multiple requests to extend the closing date, but that CitySquare II was not comfortable extending the date beyond Friday for fear that doing so could hamper Roseland’s ability to demolish the church by the city’s deadline.

“The lines of communication remain open with Roseland, and our decision not to further extend the closing does not necessarily preclude the prospect of a future transaction with them,” Ms. Jonah said.

If demolition of the church does not start by April 15, 2018, the demolition permit would expire, making it necessary for CitySquare II to start the approval process over again. That could empower the Historical Commission, as it did once before, to enact a one-year demolition delay, further postponing development of the parcel.

Ms. Jonah said she could not speak to Roseland’s reasons for requesting extensions on the closing of the deal. Asked for comment Friday evening, Ivan M. Baron, Roseland’s chief legal officer, released a statement reading, “We are working with (Hanover) to revise the structure (of the church deal) but remain fully confident in the success of CitySquare and our development there.”

Roseland - which plans to open a \$92 million, 365-unit luxury apartment complex down the street in January 2018 - has been planning to spend up to \$30 million building 84 similar apartments on the church site.

Ms. Jonah said CitySquare II would now move forward with creating a detailed plan to allow for demolition of the church to begin prior to the deadline. She said no other prospective deals for tenants are lined up since the purchase and sales agreement barred CitySquare II from speaking with other suitors.

Ms. Jonah said CitySquare II is not concerned that the passing of the closing date with Roseland will diminish the site’s long-term development prospects.

“It’s not unusual in real estate transactions of this size and scope (for) things to change,” she said. “It is well-known that this has been a challenging parcel, and we’re going to continue to

move forward to do what is in the best interest of ensuring the CitySquare project sees continued success.”

Reached Friday evening, City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr. said it was his understanding Roseland was interested in the parcel, but “needed some more time because their trying to wrap up the other project.

“My understanding is they were not necessarily looking to pull out of the deal, they were looking for another extension,” he said.

Mr. Augustus said he is confident the parcel will be utilized.

“My expectation is it will turn into something useful and productive,” he said. “I have great faith in the momentum we have downtown, and - whether it’s Roseland or somebody else – (an entity) seeing the value in that location.”

The signature Romanesque Revival church has stood in downtown Worcester since 1929. Its large, French-Canadian parish dwindled over time; in 2010, the Roman Catholic Church deconsecrated the church and sold it to CitySquare II.

At the time, the \$875,000 sale was seen as likely to save the church, and CitySquare II, which is backed by an investment arm of Hanover Insurance, said it planned to try and repurpose the building. But no viable plans emerged, and, saying plans to try and save the deteriorating building were cost prohibitive, CitySquare II moved to demolish it in 2016.

The Historical Commission refused to waive the one-year demolition delay bylaw for the church, but the delay expired earlier this year. CitySquare II is legally allowed to demolish the building any time before its permit expires April 15, 2018.

Asked whether CitySquare II would consider a viable option to repurpose the church prior to demolition were one presented, Ms. Jonah replied in the affirmative.

“Our intentions were always to save the church,” she said.

Many, including Preservation Worcester, a nonprofit that aims to save historical structures in the city from the wrecking ball, have opposed the idea of knocking down the cast stone, twin-spired church that has defined its space on Salem Square for generations.

The handsome structure survived the first round of downtown urban renewal in the 1960s, when acres around it were cleared to build a massive mall. But the latest revitalization effort, CitySquare – intended as a correction for the failed mall – has sprouted large hotel and apartment buildings around it that figure to define the area in the coming decades.

The buildings, constructed right next to the church, give it an appearance of an incongruous, if beautiful, relic. Meanwhile, some Catholics have opined that original parishioners would likely

rather have the church torn down than converted into some of the foreseeable secular purposes for which it might be used.

Staff writer Mark Sullivan contributed to this report.