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EDITORIAL: A lifeline for Notre Dame?

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For those hoping to save Notre Dame des Canadiens church, it's time to put up *NOW* or start bracing for the wrecking ball.

As the Telegram & Gazette's Brad Petrishen reported in Saturday's edition, the deadline to close a purchase and sales agreement for the Notre Dame site by Roseland Residential Trust passed by on Friday without a deal. Roseland, which is building the 365-unit luxury apartment complex nearing completion behind the church building, has been seeking to buy and raze the church to build additional apartments. CitySquare II, orchestrating the entire 22-acre development for the investment arm of Hanover Insurance, said in Reporter Petrishen's story that it plans to go ahead with demolition on its own to avoid further potential delays when the city demolition permit expires on April 15.

A hopeless situation for those wanting to save the church? Maybe. But then again, maybe not.

It's like a Pawtucket Red Sox redux, but with a shorter timeline. The PawSox negotiated exclusively with the City of Pawtucket on a new stadium until July 1, when exclusive negotiating rights ended and bidding opened up for other cities. Which is how Worcester got involved. While we don't know how our city's PawSox negotiations will pan out, we're still in that game for now. Roseland, just like Pawtucket, isn't necessarily out of the game for Notre Dame, but as the PawSox announced last summer, the "monogamous relationship" is over. Recall that when Preservation Worcester came forward with a developer at one point, CitySquare II previously commented that Notre Dame was already under an exclusive agreement with Roseland. Not anymore.

So if anyone's got a proposal and, most important, the means to back it up, now is the time to approach CitySquare II. And we mean "now."

That's because operations to bring down a building on the scale of Notre Dame - not to mention with a hotel and apartments under construction around it, and an occupied office building next door - get booked well in advance. You can be sure contacts are being made and schedules looked at already, if they haven't been finalized yet. So any window of opportunity is short indeed.

No one feels good about demolishing this magnificent structure, downtown's most majestic edifice, erected in 1929 by Worcester's sizeable French-Canadian community. Consider that CitySquare II has owned it since 2010 with the hope it could be saved, sparing it from demolition when it took down the old mall. It reportedly even brought in an expert for the Archdiocese of Boston on reclaiming churches without a practical solution.

Deborah Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester, is meeting with City Manager Edward M. Augustus Jr. to discuss ideas. She said candidates have had access to the building, including through Roseland. But as Mr. Augustus points out, from the city's perspective, even if Worcester could acquire the property for free, without a viable plan to recoup the \$8-to-\$10 million just to bring it up to code, let alone outfit it for a new purpose, the city is already contending with the considerable costs of maintaining two empty structures, Memorial Auditorium and the former Lincoln Square Boys Club. Proposals mentioned by Preservation Worcester include an international marketplace, a brewery, a restaurant, and entertainment venue, even a downtown grocery store and movie theater. Even with a viable business plan, one or more white knights are needed.

Still one wonders if every opportunity has been explored. From the perspective of its history, what about the governments or institutions in Canada and its fiercely French-speaking province of Quebec, whose diaspora spilled throughout New England? A Telegram inquiry at the Consulate-General of Canada in Boston, directed us to Lewiston, Maine. Not one but two former Catholic Churches have been successfully repurposed there. No one else apparently has checked out this avenue.

Mitch Thomas is executive director of the Gendron Franco Center in Lewiston in the former St. Mary's Catholic Church, built in 1926 in the middle of a French-Canadian conclave where people worked in the textile mills in and around it. Different architecture entirely - Neo-Gothic granite - but with a similar large-scale feel. Here the Franco-American community approached their Diocese and asked if instead of tearing it down they could take over the building to turn it into an institution celebrating the area's Franco-American culture. And so was born the non-profit Gendron Franco Center - yes, naming rights to a major contributor, although without the challenges on Notre Dame's deterioration. They even sought and got a major donation from the Sisters of Charity of Montreal, the "Grey Nuns."

Mr. Thomas points to the establishment of a banquet hall in the large basement level as key. It brings in \$500,000 a year in revenues from wedding receptions on weekends as well as conferences and funeral dinners during the week. The main level is a performance space, including displays of the community's rich Franco-American traditions. You can check out a video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=znAIBhHVChE&feature=youtu.be>

Now Lewiston, even with neighboring Auburn added, doesn't have the likes of a Mechanics Hall or Hanover Theatre. Then again, their combined populations are only a third of Worcester's. And also, they have competition from a second church, the privately-owned and converted Agora Event Center in Lewiston, which specializes in high-end weddings (including chapel) and events from as far as Boston in the renovated and even older former St. Patrick's Church.

In April of 2016, when news first broke that a demolition permit was applied for Notre Dame, Ms. Packard told us, "We don't want to be unreasonable, but you want to make sure that every possibility is explored before taking something down." So here's a couple more to check out.