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Owners planning to demolish Worcester's Notre Dame church rejected purchase offer

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A group of Central Massachusetts and Connecticut investors made a last-gasp offer earlier this year to purchase and preserve Worcester's long-vacant Notre Dame des Canadiens church, which is slated for demolition this spring.

The offer, whose existence was confirmed by the property's owner CitySquare II LLC and Moe Bergman, a Preservation Worcester board member and Worcester City Councilor, was rejected --

though the circumstances of that rejection are a matter of dispute between preservation advocates and CitySquare.

Pamela Jonah, a spokeswoman for CitySquare II, said in a statement that a "wholly inadequate" offer was made on Jan. 8, and was nixed for reasons beyond the purchase price.

"The offer ultimately was declined - and predestined to fail - because it was not economically viable, and without any concrete investment, development and financing plans from the developer," Jonah wrote. "Simply put, we did not have confidence the offer would result in a project that would benefit the city and the surrounding area, advancing critical economic development efforts in downtown Worcester."

But Jeff Cronin, a member of Preservation Worcester's Reimagine Notre Dame committee, said the investment group had experience rehabbing vacant mill buildings, and that the Hanover Insurance-backed developers refused to seriously engage with the proposal.

The investors, who have not disclosed their identities, made an admittedly low offer in January and followed up with an amended offer, Cronin said. Though CitySquare met last month with the investors and Preservation Worcester at a meeting brokered by the Worcester City Manager's Office, further cooperation did not materialize, Cronin said.

"After their meeting there was nothing from Hanover to them. Their offer had gone without counter proposals," Cronin said. "They won't counteroffer a proposal, they won't set a sales price. Who does that when they're trying to sell a property?"

In an email Wednesday afternoon Jonah disputed Cronin's account, writing that no second offer was ever made in writing.

The investment group planned to put restaurants and possibly a brewery in the church building, Cronin said.

Bergman, who said he participated in the February meeting between CitySquare and the investment group, told MassLive the original offer was low -- but that he believed there could have been further talks if not for time pressures on CitySquare's development plans.

"There was an offer that if there was more time could have been vetted further," Bergman said. "But the initial offer was lower than what would have worked."

The 88-year-old Romanesque church, which has been closed since 2007, lies on the edge of the CitySquare development project --a half-billion dollar effort to transform Worcester's downtown into a hub of hotels, market-rate housing and new businesses.

In 2010, CitySquare II LLC bought the church from the Diocese of Worcester for \$875,000. The developers have said they spent over five years and \$700,000 searching for financially viable uses for the building, but came up empty.

Any renovation that preserves the building would have to address a lack of ADA compliance, a deteriorating facade and a litany of health and safety code violations, CitySquare II said in a 2016 public filing. Three developers turned down chances to turn the church building into a hotel, CitySquare II said.

In a statement, CitySquare II said it had explored turning the church into performing arts venues, residential units, a restaurant and bar and a marketplace, without finding a viable project.

The company sought a demolition permit in 2016, which was delayed for a year by the Worcester Historic Commission to allow additional time to find other uses for the building. This month, a contractor working for CitySquare II filed for a demolition permit; the company plans to begin site work and environmental remediation in early April.

Despite frustrated efforts, historic preservation advocates have continued to pressure the developer and the city to preserve the building, which remains a striking architectural link to Worcester's history of French-Canadian Catholic immigration.

Preservation Worcester commissioned the Salem-based engineering consulting firm Structures North to assess the structural integrity of the building. In September, Professional Engineer John M. Wathne conducted a visual inspection of the property and found a series of issues, including deteriorated interior masonry, rusted structural elements, cracked concrete, a collapsing chimney and a leaking roof.

But he also came to an optimistic conclusion about the building's prospects, finding that it could be saved.

"My general impression of the structure is that it is in relatively sound condition, with a preponderance of specific conditions that relate to age-induced deterioration, however there do not appear to be any global 'deal breakers' that would render the building un-restorable," Wathne wrote.

In its statement, CitySquare II acknowledged that restoration is possible -- but "only at an enormous, uneconomical cost."

"Any effort to develop the building that is not extremely well funded and conducted by committed developers with experience in projects of this scope and complexity, would be predestined to fail," Jonah wrote. "Such a setback would be unfortunate for the church, and potentially disastrous for the downtown district."

When CitySquare purchased the building they found a variety of problems, including a lack of heating, air conditioning, ventilation or serviceable plumbing, no fire suppression system, crumbling interior finishes and environmental contamination including asbestos, PCBs and lead paint.

Jonah said the investment group did not state how much equity they planned to put into the project and did not produce a detailed funding plan.

"In the end, we concluded the offer was speculative, with no tenant prospects, or the capital to finance it," Jonah wrote "Even if they closed on the sale, we did not have assurances and safeguards that they would not negatively impact the downtown district, including the adjacent residential and hotel developments, as well as other aspects of the CitySquare project."

Cronin does not dispute the positive role Hanover Insurance has played in Worcester's development.

"We all know it's a difficult building to rehabilitate, we all know Hanover has done tremendous things in Worcester," he said. "They set an example across the country for investing in and improving their home city."

But he defended the investors as serious bidders who had come up with a cheaper way to use the property than CitySquare II anticipated, by using basement space instead of building a costly second floor within the sanctuary.

"Hanover agreed to allow us time to find someone to buy the building, but none of this can be in public eyes," Cronin said. "We honored that agreement every step of the way, and they only time we publicized this was after they had announced the demolition."

The demolition and land clearing process is expected to take about four months, CitySquare II said. The developers had faced an April 15 deadline to apply for a demolition permit, a step they took earlier this month.