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Process underway to demolish Worcester's historic Notre Dame Church



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WORCESTER - The developer of CitySquare and owner of the former Notre Dame des Canadiens Church has initiated the process required to raze the historic downtown landmark.

Cutler Associates Inc., a local general contractor, filed a building permit application with the city Friday on behalf of CitySquare II Development Co., LLC, to demolish the former church, located at 5 Salem Square.

The city's Building Department has 30 days to review and issue the permit, according to Pamela Jonah, a spokeswoman for CitySquare II.

After the permit is issued and relevant subcontractors are lined up, the contractor will mobilize on-site, likely during the first two weeks of April, she said.

During the first four to six weeks, the contractor will work in and around the structure performing environmental remediation and salvage operations, Ms. Jonah said.

Once that is done, a controlled dismantling of the structure will begin, followed by debris removal, land clearing and stabilization of the site.

That phase of the project is expected to take approximately four months to complete, Ms. Jonah said.

Under that timetable, the demolition project would be completed in August.

CitySquare II has to move forward with the demolition of the church before April 15 pursuant to a determination made by the Historical Commission in 2016 when it denied a request to waive the automatic one-year delay on the demolition of historic structures.

That one-year delay expired April 15, 2017, meaning that CitySquare II can proceed with the demolition without the need of any approval from a city board or commission, other than the need to receive a building permit.

If it does not initiate the demolition process by April 15, then CitySquare II would have to go back before the Historical Commission and seek a waiver to the city's demolition delay ordinance. Without the waiver, CitySquare II would have to wait another year before it could do anything with the church.

Ms. Jonah said CitySquare II does not have any immediate plans for re-use of the church site. She said the demolition is intended to make the property unencumbered by the church, thus making it more marketable for prospective developers.

An exclusive agreement that had been reached last year with a developer to turn the church property into 84 market-rate residential units fell through in November, thus opening it up for marketing to other developers.

Ms. Jonah emphasized that the demolition of the historic church is something that CitySquare II did not take lightly, adding it was not an easy decision.

“CitySquare II has worked tirelessly with the city of Worcester and others to build what is the largest public-private partnership outside of greater Boston in recent years,” she said in a statement. “To date, the project has been a resounding success, reopening streets long ago closed and adding new construction of a 214,000-square-foot office building occupied by Unum; a cancer treatment center as part of St. Vincent Hospital; an AC Marriott hotel; a residential community development, in addition to retail, green space and an underground parking garage.

“The CitySquare project is now in its final phase and we intend to continue our efforts to market the (Notre Dame church) parcel until a viable buyer with a transformative plan emerges,” she added.

Notre Dame Church, built in 1929, has been vacant since 2007 when it was closed by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Worcester.

CitySquare II purchased the twin-spired Romanesque Revival church from the Worcester Diocese in 2010 and incorporated the 1.34-acre church property as part of its overall 22-acre CitySquare project site in the heart of the downtown.

It is next to a 168-room hotel being built at CitySquare. The church, which has 17,250 square feet of floor space, faces the east end of the Common across Church Street, and its property is bounded by Franklin Street to the south and Trumbull Street to the east.

Local preservationists, led by Preservation Worcester, have fought hard to spare the church from the wrecking ball. The City Council even got into the act a year ago when it appealed to all parties controlling the future of the church to delay its demolition to see if plans could be found for reuse of the downtown landmark.

Ms. Jonah said CitySquare II made continuous and concerted efforts in the past several years to preserve the building and find a reuse for it, but none proved to be economically viable.

Over the years, the church has fallen into considerable disrepair.

“CitySquare II made its very best effort, at a substantial cost, to find a reuse for the building, working with other developers and various architects, engineers, contractors, and other professionals to explore numerous renovation and reuse options – including a hotel, performing arts venues, residential uses, restaurant and bar, marketplace, as well as other facilities of public accommodation,” Ms. Jonah said. “None of these proved viable, and last year, after careful consideration, we arrived at the difficult decision to sell the property.”