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City Hall Notebook: New Allies for Community Preservation

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The fate of the former Notre Dame des Canadiens Church could be finally coming to a head.

Mayor Joseph M. Petty on Tuesday night told those who are fighting to save the downtown landmark from demolition that he is still in discussions with the owner of the former church and hopes to provide an answer regarding its future by the end of the week.

The church is in the CitySquare project area. It is owned by CitySquare II Development Co. LLC, the developer of CitySquare, while Hanover Insurance Group Inc. is the principal financial investor in the CitySquare project.

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

CitySquare II bought the twin-spired Romanesque Revival church from the diocese in 2010 and incorporated the church property as part of its 22-acre CitySquare project site downtown. Since it acquired the church, CitySquare II has sought other potential uses for the property, but none has proven to be viable.

Preliminary work has begun to demolish the church.

Supporters of the church showed up once again at Tuesday night's City Council meeting to continue their pleas to save the church and seek other uses for it. Mr. Petty said he hopes to have an answer for them soon.

"What I plan on doing is probably give you an answer by the end of the week," he told them. "Hanover is still entertaining any offers from developers that come their way. I am still in discussions with Hanover, and by the end of this week we should have an answer to everything.

"I'm not giving you any false hope here, but at some time will give you an answer," he added.

New allies for Community Preservation

The group that wants to give Worcester voters the opportunity to decide in November whether to adopt the Community Preservation Act has grown in size since it was first formed and now includes 22 organizations.

The members of Yes for a Better Worcester! are: Belmont A.M.E. Zion Church, Centro Las Americas, the EcoTarium, Environmental League of Massachusetts Action Fund, Greater Worcester Land Trust, Jane Jacobs in the Woo, Main South CDC, Mass. Audubon, New Americans CDC, Oak Hill CDC, Preservation Massachusetts, Preservation Worcester.

Also, the Regional Environmental Council, the Sierra Club – Worcester Chapter, South Worcester Neighborhood Development Corporation, Walk Bike Worcester, Worcester Common Ground, Worcester Community Housing Resources, Worcester Cultural Coalition, Worcester Historical Museum, Worcester Tree Initiative and the Worcester Urban Planning Partnership.

Yes for a Better Worcester! petitioned the City Council last month, asking it to put the CPA question before the voters on the Nov. 6 ballot. The council referred the petition to its Finance Committee and there has been no further public discussion about it since.

The Community Preservation Act, which was enacted by the Legislature in 2000, allows municipalities to add a surcharge on local property taxes of between 0.5 percent and 3 percent.

Revenues generated through the surcharge would go into a dedicated fund that could then be used to finance historic preservation projects, open space acquisition and parks improvements, and community housing.

By adopting the Community Preservation Act, the city would be eligible for matching contributions (16 percent last year) from the state for those projects. But for the city to qualify for those funds the act must be adopted by voters at an election.

Yes for a Better Worcester!, which was initially composed of about a dozen organizations, is suggesting a 1.5 percent surcharge on local property taxes.

The group received some encouraging news last week when the state Senate voted unanimously to increase the real estate transfer fee, which would increase the amount of money eligible for matching funds for communities.

The Senate amendment calls for a \$30 increase to the recording fees at the state's registries of deeds which, in turn, would provide a higher state match to all CPA communities. The matter now moves to a House and Senate conference committee.

In response to criticism that Yes for a Better Worcester! should pursue the initiative petition route to place the Community Preservation Act question on the ballot instead of asking the City Council to do so, the group pointed out that legislative bodies in 19 other cities agreed to put the question on the ballot in their communities.

They were: Springfield, Boston, Pittsfield, Holyoke, Chelsea, Somerville, Fall River, New Bedford, Westfield, Easthampton, Beverly, West Springfield, Gloucester, Cambridge, Agawam, Braintree, Weymouth, Newton and Peabody.