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Editorial: Requiem for Notre Dame – As landmark is being taken down, what can we take away from this

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Just over two years ago, we wrote that it seemed like a cruel April Fools' joke when news broke that the former Notre Dame des Canadiens Church, the most beautiful and striking structure in downtown Worcester, was slated for demolition in the next phase of the CitySquare project.

“It is with great reluctance that we find ourselves in this position,” was the quote from a representative of the Boston firm overseeing the CitySquare development on behalf of the Hanover Insurance Group. “After five-plus years of trying, we don't have a viable plan.”

The two years since then, if anything, have proved Hanover's point. Despite efforts of interested groups and individuals and, of course, the Worcester City Council, no one has stepped forward with a viable development plan and the cash to back it up.

Unfortunately, we've also seen Hanover – a company that has been good to the city and that went out of its way to purchase Notre Dame when it didn't have to in an effort to save it - take heat that culminated in a court suit, despite the fact that no one else has come up with a viable solution. It was the city manager who reminded the City Council and a gallery of Notre Dame supporters at one point, that the only entity spending any money on Notre Dame is Hanover. While Hanover isn't saying, a good bet is that it's in the vicinity of \$2 million, and that's probably before demolition.

Hanover, in fact, was willing to give the building to the city. And the city wisely looked at its inventory of vacant buildings, notably Worcester Memorial Auditorium and the former Lincoln Square Boys Club next door, just to name two, plus the \$8- to \$10 million it would take to get the building up to code, let alone additional funds to repurpose it for a use that no developer had come forward with the cash to undertake, and said no thanks.

For anyone still keeping the flame of hope burning, it's over. For anyone still bearing the bitterness we've heard on all sides of this debate, let it go. After five years plus two more, there have been lots of ideas, but no serious proposal and, critically, the backing to carry it out.

Keep in mind, amid today's ballyhooed Worcester Renaissance, there was a time in the middle of the recession when things looked grim for the city, including a CitySquare project that was moribund. It was Hanover, under the leadership of Fred Eppinger, its CEO at the time, that bought part of CitySquare in 2010 through its development arm. It took on the risk when others

blanched. And it turned the project and downtown's prospects into something we all marvel at today. This was the same Fred Eppinger who, in addition to turning around his own company, exhorted Worcester toward becoming the kind of world-class city with a world-class educational system in which his world-class company could thrive. And he and his team backed that up. It's not just the \$75- to \$85 million Hanover committed to helping reinvigorate downtown, starting with the Unum Building that helped keep UnumProvident Corp. in the city core, and the developments that followed. Beyond that are the donations and efforts backing education and literacy programs in Worcester schools and other institutions. And within their own company, building a culture of volunteering and giving to the community that, in terms of the United Way, might well be unmatched for a company its size.

And of course, they helped bring about The Hanover Theatre, which has sparked the Theatre District and coming Main Street development.

So Hanover's making a separate purchase from the Diocese of Worcester of the vacant and deteriorating Notre Dame building, something that wasn't part of CitySquare, led everyone to naturally assume that Mr. Eppinger and Hanover would similarly work their magic. And of course, that was their intent. They found that it just couldn't be done, despite bringing in architects, a specialist in church renovation and reuse, and even at least one developer, if not more, who had successfully tackled a much bigger and even more complex project of a historic property, and had the kind of financing to tackle a project of this size. It didn't work. And keep in mind, Mr. Eppinger, who set out to save Notre Dame, was still part of Hanover when CitySquare filed for a permit to waive the one-year waiting period to demolish the building.

So it's no surprise that in the one year given for anyone and everyone to come up with a viable alternative, plus an additional year on top of that, no viable development plan emerged. Lots of ideas certainly, but no one willing and capable of putting up the cash.

The issue came down to geometry and location. The church's most prominent feature, the glorious cathedral-like vaulting structure, contributed to the challenge. If only it were the size of the smaller Our Lady of Mount Carmel, also endangered, it might have been doable, was one observation we heard. If it had been located in the red-hot Boston market, it might have generated the sort of revenues capable of supporting the very real costs of preserving and repurposing it. If the Diocese hadn't made a sensible, at the time, decision to draw all the building's power and heat and tie its plumbing from the mall next door, then the unheated building with the mall's demise might not have deteriorated to the point that a city inspector could push his finger through some of the faux stone on the exterior.

Two years ago, when we first wrote that "April Fools'" editorial, Deborah Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester, made the comment, "We don't want to be unreasonable, but you want to make sure that every possibility is explored before taking something down." At the very least, there wouldn't be regrets over paths not taken. It's been two years since that. Many ideas, but no one with the resources came forward.

There certainly are lessons to be learned, which we'll soon explore. But for now, it's time to let go. And, especially, to not load the burden of the building's loss upon whatever comes of the site.

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