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Everyone wanted to save it, so why is this magnificent old church being torn down?

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Photo by Aviva Luttrell | aluttrell@masslive.com

[By Melissa Hanson](#) | [MassLive](#)

When Randy Feldman rented an apartment at what is now The Grid District in downtown Worcester, he chose a three-bedroom apartment for just himself because it had a stunning view.

It was not the view of the Worcester skyline, or the Common, nor the City Hall Clock tower or Worcester's hills.

Feldman wanted to see the magnificent Notre Dame des Canadiens Church. He would watch the sun rise above the spires of the church, its intricate stone work gleaming.

"It just symbolizes all that people put into how to live better, whether it be with God, whether it be as an atheist or agnostic," said Feldman, who is Jewish. "Just how to live as a human being.

Feldman felt a connection to the culture of the church. To him, it represented how to live better as a human being, he said.

But that will be lost in the coming weeks as a massive set of claws stands at the ready, poised to take apart the 1929 church.

Dozens of preservationists from two groups spent years fighting to keep the aging Notre Dame standing, but the battle has been lost.

"I don't think you knock down that," Feldman said. "Not just because it's physically beautiful, that's a big part of it; not just 'cause it's the center of the city, that's a big part of it; but out of respect for those people who didn't make a lot of money, donating so much of their income to build that magnificent structure that they thought would be fairly everlasting and now you just destroy it on them."

Despite heartfelt pleas to the church's owner, passionate statements during City Council meetings and notes and ribbons tied to the chain link fence that surrounds the massive church, the Notre Dame will soon be gone.

So what went wrong, for Worcester to lose an iconic building?

It seems to come down to a three-year period from 2013 to 2016, preservationists say. In hindsight, they wish they did something different. But it's too late now.

As the City Council on Tuesday night squashed any last hopes, Councilor Konstantina Lukes put the grim outcome into perspective.

"This is not a wake," she said. "It's a funeral."



Photo by Aviva Luttrell | aluttrell@masslive.com

The Worcester diocese closed the church at 5 Salem Square in 2007 and it has been shuttered since, the paint peeling inside the building devoid of pews.

In 2010, the Hanover Insurance Group purchased the church.

For a while, it was unclear what Hanover planned to do with the structure. Then two years later, it became a part of the plan for CitySquare II, a 22-acre project in the heart of downtown that has been funded by private, city and state developers.

Ted Conna, the co-leader of the [Save Notre Dame Alliance](#), says he believes that the church was added to the plan to capitalize on tax dollars from the District Improvement Financing plan.

A 2012 resolution by the City Council requested that the owner of the CitySquare project "incorporate/blend in whole or in part the structure of Notre Dame Des Canadiens Church into the development of CitySquare for the purposes taking advantage of the building's history and unique architecture to provide some character and depth to CitySquare project."

But Conna says he wishes that the City Council demanded rather than requested.

It slowly started to become clear in the years following that the church would not be saved.

In 2016, the church's fate was thrust into the public: Owners sought a [demolition delay waiver](#) to start taking down the historic structure.

But the waiver was denied, leaving owners sitting on the property for a year, with the instruction of working with any interested developers.

From 2013 to 2016 was the key moment where something could have been done to save the church, some preservationists believe.

"In my mind, with what I think, the block of time between 2013 and 2016, there's three whole years where the benefit of hindsight, there would have been a collaborative process," Conna said. "After Hanover figures out this isn't going to work as a private development project, if they really wanted to save the church, what they should have done is they should have come forward and said OK, city of Worcester, OK Preservation Worcester, OK community at large, we all want to save this. If you want to do that we're going to have to pull together and do a Hanover Theatre or Mechanics Hall style job on it."

That kind of community effort never materialized.

It ended up with the Save Notre Dame Alliance and Preservation Worcester -- two separate preservation groups -- leading the fight, people on social media asking what went wrong? Where was everyone else years ago in the process?

A spokeswoman for CitySquare II said the intention was always to save the church.

"In 2010 -- when no one else would -- The Hanover Insurance Group, raised its hand, offering help while taking a leap of faith," Pamela Jonah wrote in a statement for CitySquare. "Fred Eppinger, Hanover's CEO at the time, joined public, community and business leaders on a unified mission to create change for Worcester -- with new development, preservation, public safety and future investment in mind."

Eppinger did not return calls seeking comment for this story.



Photo by Aviva Luttrell | aluttrell@masslive.com

For about 8 years, CitySquare collaborated with the community, city leaders, preservationists, developers, architects and engineers to come up with a sound reuse, Jonah said.

But no clear path ever emerged.

[Preservation Worcester added Notre Dame to its yearly list of most endangered structures](#) list in 2009 and then again in 2016 and 2017. It was also added to the Preservation Massachusetts most endangered list in 2016.

A big moment in the eventual demise of Notre Dame was the moment heat was taken away from the building.

"Probably the most consequential decision that was made long before most of our time was when they disconnected it from the heating source that was the old mall," Worcester City Manager Edward Augustus Jr. said.

A lack of heating wreaks havoc on an aging building, chipping away at concrete. The church was sitting abandoned and vandalized.

"At this time, the easier -- and most practical -- solution was to dismantle it with the mall, as it was once connected by the same mechanical systems that were no longer operational," Jonah said.

Already, the city spends about \$100,000 a year to minimally heat the Worcester Memorial Auditorium and prevent deterioration as it awaits a future use.

But last summer, Preservation Worcester organized for a study. It showed that the building was damaged, but that there was hope for repairs.

The group started reaching out to developers more than a year ago. Preservation Worcester even worked with a class at WPI, asking the students to spend a semester working on possible reuses for the church.

"We reached out far and wide to get them interested in the property," Packard said.

One developer did show interest in the church, but nothing came to fruition. CitySquare said [the offer was "wholly inadequate."](#)

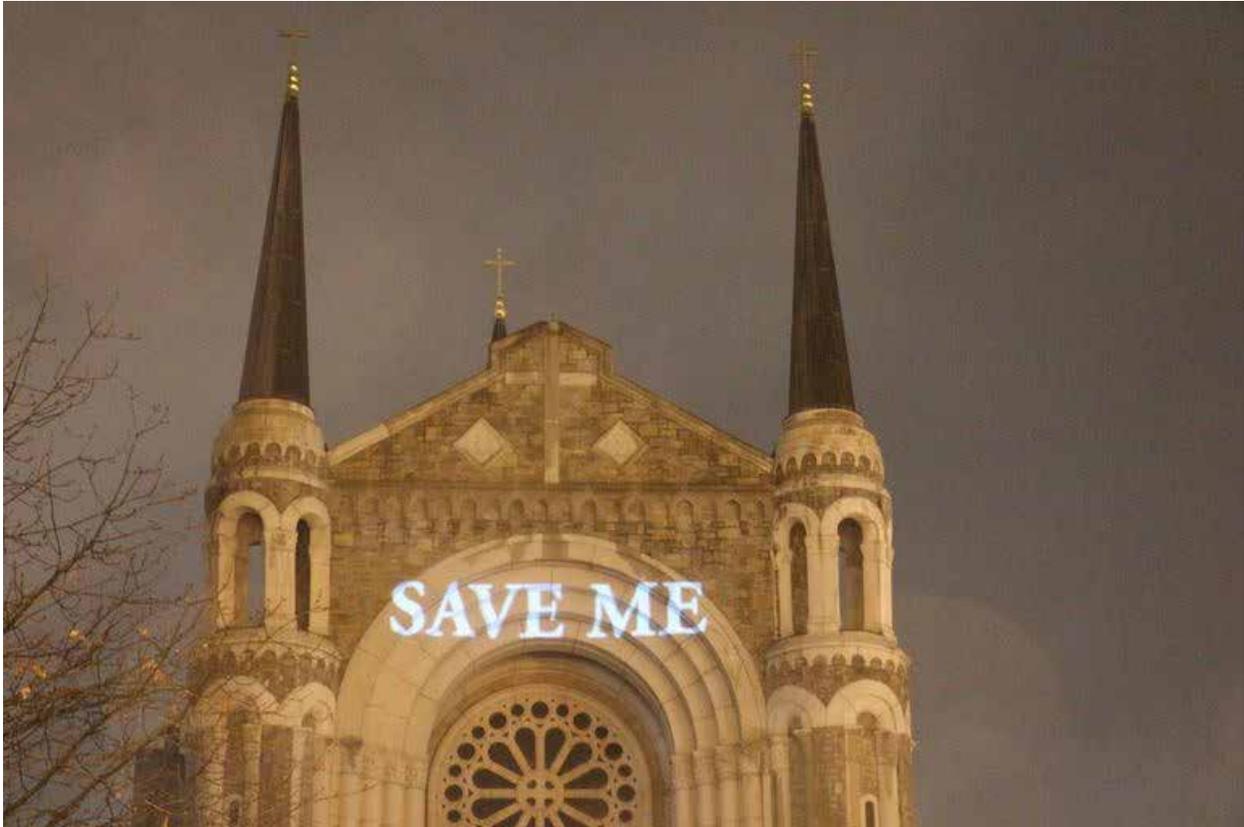
Eventually, as each month passed and the church got closer to demolition, those fighting to save it packed the City Hall chambers for meetings, loudly applauding when someone spoke of the church's beauty and significance. They'd yell "save it!" in the direction of Council members.

"It just didn't seem practical to go collect other buildings and then, what's the precedent that gets set?" Augustus asked.

City Inspector John Kelly reviewed the church and deemed it unsafe. Without putting another dollar into the structure, he said at a City Council meeting, it was past the point of no return.

"In the end, even experts determined that it would take approximately \$8 to 10 million to just save the structure, plus an additional investment to transform it to another use, as well as a unique tenant who can survive long term," Jonah said. "And, without those vital elements, there would be an inherent risk that the vacant and abandoned structure -- already a detriment to public safety and the surrounding new developments -- would continue to deteriorate and remain unused for years to come.

"If this happened, Worcester would inherit a far more difficult long-term problem with ripple repercussions to the new adjacent and surrounding developments," Jonah continued.



MassLive file photo

The Save Notre Dame Alliance took their battle to the judicial system, but a [Worcester Superior Court judge denied a preliminary injunction](#) and an [appeals court judge denied a final effort](#).

Feldman and Conna say they wish they knew sooner to find a philanthropic donor who would back the church.

However, Packard said Preservation Worcester felt it would be odd to ask such a donor to front money for a property that is owned by a private company.

"You would feel kind of odd asking people to donate to something that's under agreement with another potential buyer," she said.

Conna said there also should have been efforts to subsidize whatever a private developer would plan for the structure.

Recently, Feldman came up with the idea of transforming the church into a botanical garden. That plan would not need windows, many of which have already been removed.

For that plan, it would only cost about \$1.3 million, Feldman said, a small amount compared to the estimates of \$8 to \$12 million it would take to get the church repaired and suited for a tenant.

"It's a shame that this idea didn't come forward six months ago because this probably had the best legs, the best chance," he said.



Photo by Aviva Luttrell | aluttrell@masslive.com

Feldman said the city refereed the fight without taking leadership to find a solution.

The city has never in its history taken a building to mothball it with no plan for its future and no funding source to cover its future expenses, Augustus said.

"Does the city take it on and say to the taxpayers that you're responsible," Augustus asked. "Or if it never gets to that point, does the city become responsible for the cost of demoing the building?"

Conna asked why the city didn't move to get Mass Development or WBDC involved in saving Notre Dame.

Augustus said it was a cheap shot to ask why such organizations didn't take on the impressive task of saving the church.

"We certainly have talked about the church over the years, but the WBDC spent years redoing the Telegram & Gazette building," he said. "They've got a lot on their plate and a lot of important things for the city.

"I just think it's a cheap shot, just because we decided you should do this despite the economics of the deal," Augustus continued.

Fingers have been pointed in every direction in the fight over Notre Dame's fate.

The Save Notre Dame Alliance members say some of the blame has been placed on them: People asking, "Where were you?"

"For the first, let's call it four years, everyone was on the same side," Feldman said. "And then slowly, over the next two, nobody really knew what was going on and as soon as we knew what was going on, Preservation Worcester got very involved for two years."

But Preservation Worcester did not have the funds to purchase the church and save it from the wrecking ball, Feldman pointed out.

"They came to the party without funds for redeveloping, but plenty of ideas," he said.

Preservation Worcester Executive Director Deborah Packard said "we wish we did, too," have the funding.

"That would be great if we did, but we don't," she said. "There's only so much we can do and we certainly don't have \$10 or \$20 million to put toward a project."

Packard said at the end of the day, it came down to a private company that owned the building and who "weren't interested in working with us on it."

"It was really up to what the owners wanted to do and what they felt was in their best interest to protect their investment there," Packard said. "All I would say is they were doing what was within their rights."

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Courtesy photo

The desecration of Notre Dame has left lessons to be learned.

The first bits of demolition started in late April. In June, workers on lifts slowly continued, taking out large glass window panes and [removing the cross from atop the belfry](#).

"I think, first of all, we need to with the city identify the really important buildings in the city and then we need to have some mechanism in place that protects them beyond the year demolition delay," Packard said.

Some cities, according to Packard, require owners of buildings to put up a for sale sign if they are under demolition delay, or require a plan to be in place before demolition can begin. Such policies are ones she'd like considered in Worcester.

"I think we also need to raise awareness of the importance of historic conservation and how it really enhances a community to restore the old buildings," Packard said.

Augustus hopes that the death of preservation efforts doesn't fall with Notre Dame.

"Help us with the Auditorium, help us with the Boys Club," he said. "There's a lot of work going on and a lot of buildings that people don't seem to be taking note of that ties up a lot of money."



Photo by Melissa Hanson | mhanson@masslive.com

What lies in the future of Notre Dame is unclear.

"It's a beautiful, unique piece of architecture in the center of the city and it's going to be a loss," Augustus said. "There's no doubt about it."

Packard hoped that the City Council would vote to place the Community Preservation Act on the ballot, as the act would secure funds that could help partially or fully save buildings like Notre Dame.

But the Council did not opt to place the CPA on the ballot. Packard said she and other proponents of the CPA will seek enough signatures to get the act on the ballot before voters.

"It's losing an opportunity to create something really special and nothing, no building, that is put in that area is going to match the fine craftsmanship and magnificence of that building," Packard said. "It's impossible."

Once the demolition process is complete, CitySquare plans to sell the land.

"Hopefully Hanover will find somebody who will purchase it," Augustus said. "That's the hope."



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