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Ruling favors housing: Razing of church now looks certain

For 126 years, there has been a church of St. Joseph overlooking the neighborhood known as the Point. By this time next year, the cross-shaped church, closed by the Archdiocese of Boston in 2004, will be razed to make way for a \$19 million project with 73 affordable housing rental units.

The Planning Office of Urban Affairs, a nonprofit established by the archdiocese, has tried for five years to redevelop the site as a housing complex.

Three years ago, it proposed a \$23 million plan with 27 condominiums, 30 apartments, and a \$4.75 million senior center.

But the proposal ran into trouble. The Salem City Council rebuffed Mayor Kim Driscoll's push for the senior center. Also, more than 20 property owners filed a lawsuit saying the city had allowed for "spot zoning" to allow mixed use at the site.

Late last month, the state Supreme Judicial Court declined to hear the lawsuit, allowing for the site to be redeveloped.

"There's nothing wrong with housing, but I wish there would have been a way to accommodate both needs — to have housing, which I applaud, and the need to preserve the building," said John Carr, the attorney for the plaintiffs.

With the latest project — far different from the one proposed three years ago — nearly fully permitted, Lisa Alberghini, executive director of the Planning Office of Urban Affairs, said her organization still needs a building permit and hopes to break ground in the spring.

In addition to the 73 affordable housing units, available to families that earn a combined \$63,000 annually, the site will include 18,000 square feet of commercial and community space. She said the church and convent will be razed, and the old rectory and former school will be redeveloped as housing.

"Affordable housing, particularly rental housing, is badly needed in the city," said Alberghini. "This will really anchor that site."

Driscoll, who championed the latest proposal for the 2-acre site, said she was relieved that the litigation was over.

“Given that the former St. Joe’s site encompasses an entire city block, being able to move forward with redevelopment on this site is a critical component to improving the overall Point Neighborhood,” said Driscoll.

Driscoll said the city plans to improve the roadway intersection across from the site, and make improvements to a park near the old church.

In 1884, French-Canadian immigrants helped establish the church. The original structure burned in the Great Salem Fire of 1914, and St. Joseph’s was eventually rebuilt in the cruciform style. As the neighborhood shifted from French to Spanish speakers, the church became the spiritual home of the Point, a group of streets around the former parish where 4,000 people now live.

Lucy Corchado, the Point Neighborhood president, welcomed the prospect of more affordable housing in the largely Latino section of the city.

According to the city, there are currently just 163 rental units in 24 buildings in the Point.

Corchado, a former city councilor, said it not uncommon for more than one family to occupy an apartment in the Point, considered the most densely populated neighborhood in the city.

“Given the economic climate that we’re in, I think there are people who are a check away from meeting that option of affordable housing,” said Corchado.

While Corchado and other Point residents embraced the project, others, like Teasie Riley-Goggin, objected.

Riley-Goggin opposed the plan to relocate the senior center to the site in 2007, and said she still objects to razing the former church.

“If progress is destroying the hope and faith of people, then there’s something wrong with our culture,” she said.

Alberghini said the Planning Office of Urban Affairs would find a way to memorialize the legacy of the St. Joseph parish. She said the project is compatible with the goals of the archdiocese and the former church.

“It’s furthering the social justice ministry that the parish engaged in for decades,” she said. “This is the next step in that good work.” ■