

Council signs resolution to keep the homeless out of old church

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SALEM — City councilors signed a resolution last night urging the Salem Mission to abandon its plans to convert the former St. Mary's Italian Church into housing for the homeless.

It was not unanimous, but many that supported the resolution introduced by Councilor-at-large Joan Lovely accused shelter officials of breaking a previous promise to preserve the church.

"The Salem Mission ... (has) gone on public record ... stating the church would be forever preserved in (its) current state and no housing would ever be permitted," reads the resolution.

The resolution also urges the shelter to work with the city to find an alternative way to provide transitional housing.

"I know things change, but promises were made to that neighborhood and this community that that church wouldn't change," Lovely said.

"This church is more than a church," Councilor-at-large Steve Pinto said. "It belongs to that community. The stained-glass windows have the names of people that put their blood, sweat, gold and hard work into that church."

But Councilor-at-large Tom Furey, the only councilor to oppose the resolution, said the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston was the entity that turned its back on parishioners by closing the church.

"Your argument belongs with the archdiocese in Boston, not with the city," Furey said.

He also questioned why the city didn't get so heavily involved in the preservation of other churches, including St. Joseph, when they were slated to be converted for new uses.

"Why this particular church do we draw the line?" Furey said.

But Lovely said the city has to stand up for the residents whose neighborhood has transformed dramatically since the shelter moved in.

"Leadership is representing our constituency," Lovely said. "They've been saying for a long time that they love that church."