

## Our View: Arts center a good option for former church

May 05, 2009 05:10 am

—

The Salem Mission ought to give Joe Cultrera, a filmmaker and neighbor, along with others in the city's cultural community, a reasonable chance to show they can come up with the cash and programming to turn the former St. Mary's Italian Church into a viable arts center.

Their plan represents the only realistic proposal for preserving the ornate interior of the church — which was the center of life for Salem's Italian-American community — from its construction in 1925 until its sale by the Boston Archdiocese five years ago.

It's hard to fault the Salem Mission, which operates a much-needed homeless shelter on the property, for wanting to expand its programming to include 20 studio apartments that would be created by subdividing the upper and lower church sanctuaries. They see providing such housing as a means of achieving their goal of eliminating the need for a temporary shelter entirely — and preserving the exterior of the church (which even before the sale had lost its elegant side campanile to the ravages of time and the weather).

But Cultrera, producer of well-received documentary films about the clerical abuse scandal, Salem's Haunted Happenings and Peabody's leather industry, who's back living in his old neighborhood, believes he can marshal the resources to convert the church into an arts center — using the lower floor for rotating exhibits and the upper sanctuary with its murals and stained-glass windows for performances by the Salem Theatre Company and similar groups. He at least deserves the chance to try.

Following a meeting with neighbors including Cultrera Sunday night, Andrew Oliver, president of the Salem Mission board, expressed a willingness, albeit a very reluctant one, to listen to other proposals. On the other hand he has made it clear that while more housing wasn't their first choice for the church, they feel such a project is entirely in keeping with their obligation to both help the less fortunate and maintain the property.

The truth is, however, that the kind of housing proposed for the church could be located elsewhere in downtown Salem. But the church interior, once gutted, will never be replaced.

The Mission, under the leadership of Oliver and executive director Mark Cote, has worked hard to be a responsible neighbor. And get defensive when others complain about having a shelter in their midst. How better, however, to address the fears and anger such a facility can breed than by creating an arts center which, by its very nature, would encourage people to visit and feel comfortable being there?

This could have benefits for all involved and is certainly worth trying. If it doesn't work, the Mission is by all means entitled to turn the former church into housing.

Copyright © 1999-2008 cnhi, inc.

[http://www.salemnews.com/puopinion/local\\_story\\_124231549.html?keyword=topstory](http://www.salemnews.com/puopinion/local_story_124231549.html?keyword=topstory)