

Our view: Tough task finding next best use for beloved church

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There's no better use for St. Mary's Italian Church than the one for which it was built in 1925 — to serve as a house of worship for the city's Italian-American community.

But the building was abandoned in 2004 by the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston, which sold the church and adjacent property to the Salem Mission for \$2 million. And though it was originally intended to become the new home of the Crombie Street Church, the Protestant congregation that had established Salem's first homeless shelter in its old quarters a few blocks away, the numbers its services attracted couldn't justify the expense of maintaining it. (According to Andrew Oliver, president of the Mission's board of directors, when it was finally dissolved a few years ago the church had only seven members, four of whom were Mission employees.)

Which is why Oliver's group and residents of the surrounding neighborhood find themselves pondering what's next for the old church, still full of paintings, stained-glass windows and other religious artifacts, some of which would be difficult — or even impossible — to remove.

The Mission board has proposed putting 20 low-rent studio apartments in the building, which it rightly contends is consistent with its goal of eliminating homelessness and at the same time would preserve the exterior of the structure.

But former parishioners and members of the newly formed Endicott Street Neighborhood Association make a good case for seeking an alternate use of the building that would preserve the interior and not add to the numbers of people with mental health and other issues living on the block between High and Endicott streets.

Fortunately, the Mission appears to have acknowledged neighbors' concerns with the announcement this week that it will add a neighborhood representative to its board, take additional steps to keep unruly clients under control and give those who would like to turn the church into an arts center additional time to raise the necessary funds.

As a result of the Mission's concessions and the leadership shown by Mayor Kim Driscoll and state Rep. John Keenan, what could have been a shelter-bashing session before the City Council Monday night turned into a fairly reasoned discussion of problems and alternatives.

Salem can take pride in the fact it has assumed responsibility for sheltering those who cannot or will not provide the same for themselves. But it's not fair to put that burden entirely on a single, densely populated neighborhood — which is why the Mission should even now be seeking other locations for its next housing project.

For many older residents of the neighborhood, the former St. Mary's Church is still a revered icon built, in the words of 94-year-old Paul Cultrera, "with our pennies, our gold and our bodies and soul."

We continue to believe that by working together, the Salem Mission, city officials, neighbors and other interested parties can find a new use for this sanctuary that will preserve its ability to inspire long after it's outlived its religious purpose.