

Salem Mission housing plan sees opposition

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SALEM — The Salem Mission may not need the approval of any local board to convert the former St. Mary's Italian Church into housing for the homeless and to remove its stained glass windows.

And that, it turns out, may be a good thing because its building plan is losing badly in the court of public opinion.

The Salem Historical Commission weighed in last night with a strongly-worded letter to the Massachusetts Historical Commission. The board said it opposes the \$3 million church conversion and recommended, instead, that the charity build an addition on top of its main building, the former church youth center at 56 Margin St. that is used as a homeless shelter.

"... The position of the commission is that the church building may be eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places, and that the removal of the stained glass windows will have an adverse impact on this prominently located historic property," Jessica Herbert, vice chairwoman of the board, wrote in a letter that was endorsed by the board.

The local historical commission's vote, in this case, is purely advisory since it has no say over the Mission's plan to put 20 apartments in the church. However, the board is not alone in opposing the project.

Historic Salem Inc., a private preservation group, wrote a letter to the state yesterday saying the project "will result in severe loss of integrity" to the 1925 church building.

As a result, HSI said it has listed the church as "endangered."

Councilor-at-large Joan Lovely said she plans to introduce a resolution before the City Council tomorrow night opposing the Mission's plan. It is likely to pass overwhelmingly.

Ward 3 Councilor Jean Pelletier, who represents the Mission neighborhood, praised the Historical Commission last night for its strong stand.

"That letter just blew me away," he said.

As he left last night's meeting, Salem Mission President Andrew Oliver was asked if this growing opposition could force the charity to change its expansion plan. Oliver said these latest developments will be discussed at his board's next meeting.

This strong public sentiment is emerging as the Mission awaits word on state and federal funding requests on a project expected to cost \$3 million or more. The applications for public funds is what triggered a review by the Massachusetts Historical Commission, which is charged with ensuring that all options are explored before the project goes forward.

The Salem Historical Commission drafted its letter after a large group of residents turned out last month to protest the plan to remove the stained-glass windows. The project is opposed by many, including the newly-formed Greater Endicott Street Neighborhood Association, made up of residents who live near the site.

This fight over a church built by Italian immigrants, closed more than five years ago by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston and later purchased by the Salem Mission, was sparked, in part, by a neighbor.

As soon as the Mission announced its plans, Joe Cultrera, a documentary filmmaker who recently moved back to the Italian neighborhood, formed the Salem Community Arts Center, a group interested in purchasing the church. It has not made clear, however, how it will raise the funds to do that.

Cultrera was at last night's meeting and praised the Salem Historical Commission for its letter, which also suggested that the Mission explore "creative" uses of the church, such as the performing arts center.

That letter, Cultrera said, "honors our neighborhood's history in a way I don't think the city has ever done before."

The Salem Mission, for its part, said it plans a historic renovation that will retain most of the exterior of the church. However, the stained glass windows don't meet the state building code, aren't energy efficient and would provide no direct light for residents, architects for the charity said.

The Salem Mission said it explored the idea of adding a floor, or floors, to its youth center and rejected it for a number of reasons.

Adding two floors, the number needed for 20 apartments, "would be a much more complicated project ... (and) the cost would likely be prohibitive," Oliver wrote in a letter to the local board.

Construction at the former youth center would require closing the homeless shelter and moving residents to another shelter, he said. "We have been advised that funding for the shelter would be transferred along with the residents, and this would cause serious funding problems for the Mission. If we lose funding, we would have to consider laying off staff ..."

If it added only one floor to the youth center, and just eight to 10 apartments, it would not allow the charity to accomplish its other important goal of reducing the number of shelter beds as it adds permanent housing, Oliver said.

Even if they decided to build above the current shelter, the future of the church would remain "unanswered," Oliver wrote.

"In the years we have owned the church, we received no approaches from parties interested in buying it until the concept put forward by the (Salem Community Arts Center)," he stated.

"After four months, we have heard no details of their plans ..." Oliver stated.

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