

Old Chancery, Cathedral Convent to be Razed

ROCKFORD—Bishop David Malloy and Cathedral of St. Peter Rector Father Stephen St. Jules changes and improvements to the Cathedral of St. Peter campus during an informational meeting Nov. 19.

About 35 people gathered in the fellowship hall to find out about the next chapter in parish and diocesan history.

Father St. Jules addressed the group first, explaining that the former convent situated next to the Cathedral of St. Peter School will be razed during the school's Christmas break.

The action was recommended by the Cathedral Finance and Pastoral Councils when they were convened in August, after the property, located at 1260 N. Court St., was cited by the City of Rockford for violations of four city building codes.

The complaint listed four formal section code violations which come with a fine of \$750 per day per violation totaling \$3,000 per day.

Father St. Jules said the Finance and Pastoral Councils recommended demolition due to the condition of the property, cost to maintain a vacant building and lack of use by the cathedral.

According to diocesan chancellor and legal counsel, Ellen Lynch Harrison, the Diocese of Rockford worked with the City of Rockford toward a solution for the property, and thereby avoid the fines.

The diocese informed the city of its plan to seek demolition, to occur at a time when it could assure the safety of the students, faculty and families of the cathedral school.

The violations prompted discussion on another vacant property on the cathedral campus which is owned not by the parish, but by the diocese.

According to Lynch Harrison the question of what to do with the former chancery and bishop's residence located at 1245 N. Court St. went to the diocesan finance council again after concern that it too, might face city ordinance violations as it has been vacant since 2009.

The decision to also raze the former chancery was recommended by the diocesan finance council for several reasons. Some of those reasons include safety and financial concerns.

According to Diocesan Property Manager Brian Heinkel, by razing both buildings together, there will be less disruption to the neighborhood and by timing the demolition to occur during the Christmas holiday break when school is not in session, it will help assure the safety of the cathedral school community and save money on demolition in an off-season.

How the decision was made

The former chancery building, constructed in 1929, was vacated in 2002 when a new administration center and chancery was purchased at 555 Colman Center Dr.

The 1245 N. Court St. property remained the bishop's residence at a cost of approximately \$113,000 a year to operate until the property was eventually vacated by Bishop Thomas G. Doran in June of 2009 prior to his retirement. The utilities remained on, at an annual cost of just over \$24,000.

After Bishop Malloy was installed in 2012 he addressed the Diocesan Finance Council regarding the former bishop's residence. Reports from the Finance Council's 2009 review of the Chancery building were reviewed and new assessments were made.

The Diocesan Building Commission had been tasked with assessing the property and it recommended the building be razed. However, a member of the Finance Council noted the desire of some members of the cathedral parish that the bishop live next to the cathedral but also observed the excessive cost of maintenance, repair and operating costs was a significant factor against doing so.

All previous options were considered again and it was noted that before expending revenue, the actual use must be balanced against the funds needed to accomplish the goal.

There was no definitive decision made at that time, but according to diocesan records, in 2013 council members acknowledged how the expense of repairing the property far exceeded any possible use or need, beyond the one wish that the bishop live next to the cathedral.

Property reviewed again in 2017

On July 6, 2017, Bishop Malloy spoke with Rockford Mayor Tom McNamara regarding the 1245 N. Church St. property.

The mayor expressed his concern for the city's first responders who, at the time, had been called to various arsons that were plaguing the city and targeting abandoned buildings. The mayor asked the diocese to come to a decision soon regarding the property.

At that time the diocesan property manager approached Matthew Magdziarz, MAI, a certified general appraiser with Real Property Consultants, a Chicago real estate appraisal and consulting firm, to examine the 1245 N. Church St. property to determine its current “as is” market value.

After examining the property and estimating costs based on August 2017 data, the professional’s conclusion was that to upgrade and remodel the building for alternative use would be close to \$2 million and that the building was at the end of its effective and economic life.

Some of the options considered by the diocesan Finance Council and College of Consultors were:

1. Continue as the diocese has for the past nine years: Keep the property vacant and maintain it with costs of \$24,000 annually while the building continues to crumble; risking eventual deterioration to the point where city codes are violated and future major expenses and fines will be unavoidable.

2. Discover a new use for the building which had not previously been considered and renovate it at a cost that would exceed \$2 million. Costs will depend on renovations required to meet an intended use.

3. Sell the building to an interested investor and allow new owners to decide a use for property.

4. Raze the building and improve the property to expand the parking lot and deed the property to the cathedral.

The Diocesan Finance Council and College of Consultors revisited the discussion in 2018 after the violations were received on the former convent near the former chancery and voted that the only fiscally prudent decision was to raze the building.

Next steps

Father St. Jules told those gathered Nov. 19 that plans for the future of the convent property could include a simple green space, extension of an adjacent park and playground, or a prayer walk or community garden, but the decision will ultimately be made by the Cathedral of St. Peter.

Improvements to the land occupied by the chancery will include landscaping and extending the cathedral parking lot by 30-50 spaces, which Bishop Malloy said would “help alleviate some congestion in the neighborhood” during large diocesan events such as ordinations, Chrism Masses, etc.

The Diocese of Rockford will then deed the property to the Cathedral of St. Peter.

Not everyone attending the Nov. 19 meeting was happy about the upcoming changes to the cathedral campus. Some of those attending were parishioners and some were longtime neighbors.

Some nearby residents expressed concern that by razing the buildings “some of our history is being lost.” Others felt there was not sufficient input from parishioners.

Bishop Malloy said various uses for the property were considered over the years including use as a Catholic Charities central office, a museum and a priests residence. However, the cost of upgrading and renovating the property was determined excessive.

According to the Ruck-Pate architectural firm, which evaluated the property in 2009, the estimated cost of renovation at that time was \$2.3 million. So, according to diocesan records, the former chancery was “decommissioned” on Nov. 5, 2009, and the future of the building would wait for a new bishop to decide.

At the Nov. 19 meeting, there was a question about the future of the cathedral school. Bishop Malloy explained that the school is occupied and the building is used for religious education so it is not part of this process. And even when the cathedral students become part of the new All Saints Catholic Academy, the future of that building will need to be considered by the parish.

History

During the time of Bishop Edward F. Hoban, it was decided that the diocese had outgrown its office in the basement of the bishop’s residence on National Avenue in Rockford where offices had been located since 1917. In 1929 the diocese purchased the property at 1245 N. Court St. and built a three-story building connecting two original buildings: 1245 N. Court St., the office portion constructed in 1929; and 1243 N. Court St., the residence portion, constructed about 1900.

1245 N. Court St. served as the diocesan chancery office and bishop’s residence until a new chancery office at 555 Colman Center Dr. was purchased on Sept 13, 2002. The new building allowed consolidation of administrative services offered at three locations.

The convent was built in 1929 originally for the Sisters of Loretto who staffed the school. It was later used as a perpetual adoration chapel.

The building has been vacant for more than a decade. Interior elements of the buildings have been removed and have been or will be repurposed.

“My work as Bishop of Rockford involves two things — an office and a sanctuary. My office, as I inherited from Bishop Doran, is located at 555 Colman Center Dr.

“My priority and practice since becoming Bishop of Rockford, has been to make the cathedral my parish — my spiritual home. As you know, I celebrate the 7:30 a.m. Mass here on Sundays as much as my schedule permits and of course our large diocesan-wide special celebrations, as much as possible, also take place in the cathedral,” Bishop Malloy said.

“Repurposing this property is not only responsible financial stewardship, but it will benefit the cathedral, the neighborhood and my own ministry in serving the people of this Rockford Diocese at their spiritual center which is the Cathedral of St. Peter,” Bishop Malloy added.

Demolition is scheduled to begin just before Christmas and be complete by the first week of January 2019 at an estimated cost of \$43,724 for the convent and \$88,920 for the former chancery.