

Shuttered parochial school gets new life Sale clears way for community center

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By Michael Paulson, Globe Staff | October 13, 2007

Eight hundred and fifty-six days after triggering a huge local controversy by locking a group of elementary school pupils out of a Brighton parochial school, Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley sold the building yesterday to the same group of activists he once feared were planning a sit-in at the site.

The sale of the former Presentation School building for \$1 million, which both sides said was a bargain, brings an end to one of the most unhappy episodes of O'Malley's tenure, during which the archdiocese at first refused to allow anyone back into the building, even to rescue the children's goldfish and butterfly.

The cardinal's decision to close the school early, which he said was prompted by concern for the children's safety, was roundly criticized at the time, most vociferously by Mayor Thomas M. Menino, who presided over a makeshift end-of-year ceremony at Faneuil Hall for the first-through-sixth graders.

But yesterday afternoon, O'Malley, Menino, and dozens of children and adults who protested the June 2005 school closing smiled together in front of the Oak Square school building to celebrate the completion of an agreement, reached last year, to transfer ownership of the former Our Lady of Presentation School from the archdiocese to a neighborhood group, the Presentation School Foundation. After a press conference, the neighbors rushed in to check out the vacant school building, decorated by a handmade banner that read, "We Did It."

"The school closing is in the past," said Menino, who held the door open as children ran inside. "This is about the future."

O'Malley, who has expressed regret for his handling of the lockout, was praised by speakers yesterday for helping to make the sale possible. At the press conference, he praised neighborhood activist Kevin M. Carragee, who had been a sharp critic of the archdiocese, for his perseverance and said to the crowd, "Be assured of our prayers as you continue the good work that has begun in this neighborhood."

The foundation said it hopes to reopen the building in early 2009 as a community center with a focus on education, including a preschool, afterschool programs, adult education, and immigrant outreach. The archdiocese has insisted that the foundation not open a private school in the building because it wants to protect rising enrollment at the last Catholic school in Allston-Brighton, at nearby St. Columbkille Church.

Foundation officials said that to finance the purchase and their initial operating costs they have borrowed \$1.26 million from Boston Community Capital, an organization that makes loans for development in low-income communities. They have also received a \$350,000 gift from the New Balance Foundation and have raised \$150,000 from a variety of other sources. The Boston Foundation has given the Presentation School Foundation three grants for staffing.

The Presentation School property is assessed at \$3 million by the city, and the school foundation had initially offered \$2 million to the archdiocese, but O'Malley cut the price last year in an effort to salve the wounds caused by his handling of the school closing.

At the time, several groups of worshipers were staging round-the-clock occupations of parishes the archdiocese was attempting to close. Five of those church occupations continue, and one of them, Our Lady of Mount Carmel in East Boston, will mark three years in vigil tomorrow.

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