

Diocese to sell school to community group

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By Charles A. Radin, Globe Staff | October 20, 2006

The Archdiocese of Boston agreed yesterday to sell the former Our Lady of the Presentation School in Brighton to a nonsectarian citizens' group, ending one of the bitterest disputes between the church and a local community that arose from widespread closings of parishes and schools over the past three years.

In an effort to rebuild its tattered relations with the community, the archdiocese put the sales price at \$1 million, half the \$2 million the citizens group had offered for the school building. The group, the nonprofit Presentation School Foundation, plans to operate an affordable preschool, after-school programs, summer camps, and adult education programs at the site in partnership with the YMCA and the Boston Public Library.

Cardinal Sean P. O'Malley, who arranged the reduction in price to less than half the property's market value, told about 120 upbeat, applauding residents of the neighborhood that closings of schools and churches and the clergy sexual abuse scandal deeply wounded the Brighton community. He expressed hope that resolution of the struggle over the Presentation School building would be a step toward healing.

"To the families and children of the former Our Lady of the Presentation School, we regret the events of the past," O'Malley said.

The chairman of the foundation stressed yesterday that the school building needs more than \$2 million in repairs and that \$4 million will have to be raised to launch the envisioned program fully. That is not expected before 2008.

"As of today, we are halfway home; that's all," said Kevin Carragee, the foundation chairman. "The deal creates an opportunity. Now the opportunity will have to be seized. . . . We will need expanded support from corporations, universities, and foundations."

While neighborhood activists said that dealing with the archdiocese was extremely frustrating initially, Carragee praised the attitude of the church in recent negotiations.

"They very much want us to succeed," he said. "There could have been an agreement that made chances of success much less. There is an awareness on their part of a frayed relationship with this community."

Our Lady of the Presentation became a symbol of public anger over church and school closings after the archdiocese, fearing that protesters would occupy the building, locked the facility in June 2005, on the night before kindergarten graduation.

Kindergartners subsequently graduated in a ceremony held on the Oak Square traffic island outside the school, while the sixth-grade graduation was hosted at Faneuil Hall by Mayor Thomas M. Menino, who wrote O'Malley that the closing was "reprehensible," "unconscionable," and a "heartbreaking insult."

Menino told O'Malley yesterday that all was forgiven. "At times, we have had issues," the mayor said to the cardinal, to appreciative laughter from the crowd. "That was about yesterday. This is about tomorrow."

"At my church," said Menino, who is Catholic, "we all forgive. We have to go on."

Jennifer Doyle, whose daughter, Lucy, was one of the kindergartners locked out of graduation, was cheered even more than Menino and O'Malley for her work as president of the Presentation School Foundation.

The closing "was very confusing for Lucy and for me," Doyle said. "She said, 'I'll see everybody next year,' and I had to explain to her that no, you won't." Lucy, who now attends public school, "still talks about being able to go back to Presentation and see her friends and teachers and play on the playground," Doyle said.

There will not be a school there again -- part of the agreement between the archdiocese and the foundation rules out the presence of a school in the building that might compete with Catholic schools for students -- but following festivities announcing the deal yesterday, Lucy made a bee line for the playground.

What would she do now that she could return to the school? she was asked. "Use the monkey bars," she said without hesitation.

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