



Kevin Carragee (foreground) along with families who are trying to buy Our Lady of the Presentation School in Brighton. (Essdras M. Suarez/ Globe Staff)

Parochial school talks hit a snag

Litigation ties up deal, church says

The Boston Globe

By Kathleen Burge, Globe Staff | March 15, 2006

After nearly two years of negotiations, of ups and downs, setbacks and breakthroughs, the group that wanted to buy Our Lady of the Presentation School from the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston thought that at long last they were on the brink of a deal. But optimism has suddenly faded for speedy acceptance of a \$2 million offer the group submitted late last month.

Members of the Presentation School Foundation, formed after the archdiocese announced in 2004 that it would close the school, have received a letter from David W. Smith, the chancellor of the archdiocese, saying he is pessimistic.

"We were stunned," said Kevin Carragee, chairman of the foundation. "We thought an agreement was within grasp."

Church officials denied yesterday that they have reversed their position on working with the foundation, saying they had discussed selling the property with foundation leaders but never entered formal negotiations. Smith said in an interview yesterday that a lawsuit filed in August by a group of former parishioners of Our Lady of the Presentation Church, also closed by the archdiocese, makes it impossible for the archdiocese to agree to sell the property.

"Nothing would make us happier than to see them be successful in buying the property and continuing to use it for the people in the community," Smith said. "That's our goal. But our goal has been frustrated by the litigation."

The lawsuit seeks an accounting of the parish's assets and unspecified financial damages for the emotional distress parishioners suffered when the archdiocese closed the school two days early last year. Church officials changed the building's locks and canceled prekindergarten graduation to avoid a feared takeover of the school.

On the advice of lawyers, Smith said, the archdiocese is not negotiating the possible sale of property in any of the other parishes that sued the archdiocese after churches were closed. Church officials made an exception in the Brighton case because negotiations had begun before the lawsuit was filed, he said.

In a joint statement in June, the archdiocese and the neighborhood group said they had agreed that the foundation

would have 60 days to submit a bid on the property.

Foundation members said that even though the lawsuit was filed in August, negotiations on selling the property continued until recently. They said an arrangement was discussed in which they would try to reach agreement, but not finalize the deal until the lawsuit was resolved.

"We were stunned by what we see as an 11th-hour reversal of their position regarding the litigation," Carragee said.

To allow negotiations to continue, Carragee said, foundation members had reluctantly agreed to forgo their original plans for an elementary school on the site, putting that decision in the hands of the archdiocese, which feared a school might siphon students from other local parochial schools.

The foundation's plans for the building includes an affordable preschool, a YMCA afterschool and summer programs, adult education programs, and educational enrichment programs.

The group will host a community meeting about the problems in negotiations tonight starting at 5 p.m. in Oak Square Common, across from the school, and move later in the evening to the YMCA.

Yesterday, Jennifer Doyle, the foundation's president and the mother of a former Presentation School student, said she was disheartened.

"It does feel like there has been a major shift in tone," she said. "We were really working toward an agreement, and it feels like the brakes have been put on."

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