

Turmoil over lockout could hinder archdiocese's plans for school



By Mark Jewell, Associated Press Writer | June 10, 2005

BOSTON --Archbishop Sean O'Malley's decision to lock children out of their school two days early could come back to haunt the archdiocese, which may need city officials to sign on to any alternate use for the building, the closed school's supporters said Friday.

Mayor Thomas Menino and members of the city council were outraged that O'Malley ordered the locks changed this week at Our Lady of Presentation School in the city's Brighton section. Menino even offered the use of historic Faneuil Hall on Friday for a graduation ceremony that was to have been held at the school.

The archdiocese is reconsidering its proposal to use the property as a church tribunal, but almost any use of the building, other than as a school, could require a zoning change.

"The archdiocese shot itself in the foot," said City Councilor Jerry McDermott, an alumnus of the school. "It was a terrible tactical move on their part ... They've helped us gain strength."

Church officials said they acted two days before the school's scheduled closing date because of reports that people planned to stage an around-the clock sit-in at Our Lady of Presentation. Such occupations have successfully staved off the closing of at least eight other church buildings targeted in the archdiocese's reorganization plan.

The depth of support for a foundation seeking an alternative future for Our Lady of The Presentation School was clearly visible in the ranks of politicians who attended Friday's graduation.

Menino was greeted with two standing ovations from an audience of about 200, including about 60 first- through sixth-graders who collected diplomas and achievement awards.

Also on hand -- and receiving hearty applause as well -- was Massachusetts Secretary of State William Galvin, who put up a personal \$100,000 line of credit to help give the school a one-year extension and avoid closure last year.

After the lockout, the archdiocese said O'Malley had decided to revisit the plans for a tribunal at the building to handle annulments and internal church trials, including proceedings for priests accused of sexual abuse.

Spokesman Terry Donilon said Friday that "everything is off the table" in the archdiocese's planning for the building.

The archdiocese has not filed for a zoning variance to convert the school property for another use.

A foundation that fought the school's closure last year offered to buy the property and turn into a community center housing a new privately run grammar school, daycare service and adult education center. The archdiocese rejected the proposal, but the foundation's chairman said Friday the turmoil over the lockout could force the archdiocese to reconsider.

"We have strong political support. This will be a donnybrook," chairman Kevin Carragee said.

The school, which had about 120 students in preschool through grade 6, is among church properties closing under a broad reorganization of Boston-area parishes. The reorganization is the result of declining attendance, fewer priests and persistent financial struggles, due in part to the clergy sex abuse crisis.

Most of Friday's graduation was devoted to rewarding children for academic progress. Students who were bused to Faneuil Hall under police escort picked up achievement awards on a stage surrounded by paintings and busts of icons of U.S. history, including George Washington. The building was the site of speeches by Samuel Adams and other Revolutionary War patriots.

"For the children especially, this is a joyous occasion," Carragee said. "It's been a difficult year with a profoundly difficult past two days, given the lockout by the archdiocese.

"These kids are going to remember this for the rest of their lives."

A separate graduation was held Thursday for the school's preschool and kindergarten students, who were honored at Oak Square in Brighton. ■

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