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THE POLITICAL TRAIL

Church's poor Presentation Archdiocese bucks residents' hopes

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By Michael Jonas | June 5, 2005

When the doors swing shut Friday on the final day of classes at Our Lady of the Presentation School, it will be more than just a Catholic grammar school that Brighton will lose. Many in the community will also lose any last degree of faith they had in an institution that holds the nurturing of that very quality as its central mission.

After losing the battle last year to save Presentation School from being closed -- itself a consequence of the fiscal crisis brought on in part by the clergy sexual abuse scandal -- school parents and a network of community residents came up with a proposal they thought would be a slam dunk. The group, which formed a nonprofit foundation, proposed buying the school building from the archdiocese and turning it into a school and neighborhood center serving the diverse needs of the Allston-Brighton community.

The foundation envisioned an independent grammar school, either Catholic or nonsectarian. The YMCA across the street was prepared to run an after-school program in the school building that has been an Oak Square fixture for 80 years. Adult education programs, including English classes for the neighborhood's growing immigrant population, were contemplated for evenings. And the group was prepared to raise the money to buy the building at fair market value.

Church leaders had said the reuse of church property would have to take into consideration the financial needs of the archdiocese as well as the social mission of the Catholic Church, says Kevin Carragee, chairman of the Presentation School Foundation. "Our proposal did both," he says.

Yet following an early March meeting with Bishop Richard Lennon, the word from on high was that the archdiocese would not reconsider its January announcement that the school building would house a church tribunal that considers marriage annulment petitions. Residents argued to no avail that such administrative functions could be located in almost any surplus archdiocesan property, while their plan would address very real needs of the Allston-Brighton community.

A spokesman for the archdiocese declined to comment last week. Local officials and Mayor Tom Menino have been outspoken in their support for the community foundation plans and in their opposition to the church's proposed use. Ultimately, a change of use will require zoning relief from the city, setting the stage for the battle to move to City Hall, where the archdiocese may find few friends.

"I think there could have been a win-win, and it didn't happen," says state Representative Kevin Honan. "I would expect serious trouble at the zoning board." Carragee says of any zoning relief the church may seek, "We'll oppose that with all our strength."

City Councilor Jerry McDermott graduated from Presentation School and was married in Presentation Church, where his children were baptized and from which his father was buried. "I've tried to figure them out, but it just boggles the mind," he says of the church leaders who have turned a deaf ear to the community's desires. "Just from a pure public relations standpoint, you would think they would want to build up some good will just to try to heal the wounds," he says of the closing of the church and parish school.

"Unfortunately, the hierarchy of our church has continually let down the community," says state Senator Steve Tolman.

With parents and students bracing for a painful moment later this week, when classes at Presentation are dismissed for good, Carragee says the community has no intention of backing down. At 4:30 on Friday afternoon, supporters of the proposed community center and independent grammar school plan to rally at Presentation School to make that clear.

"They want to wear us out, and they hope this ends when the school closes," says Carragee. "Our resolve will match their arrogance."

Michael Jonas can be reached at jonas@globe.com. ■