

Archdiocese to keep OLP, reject school bid

By Erin Smith/ Staff Writer
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The Boston Archdiocese last week rejected the community's bid to buy Our Lady of the Presentation and save the school from closing.

Students, parents, teachers and community members are holding a candlelight vigil to protest the closing at Oak Square Common on Jan. 17 at 4:30 p.m.

Three weeks ago, OLP parents met with Bishop Richard Lennon and presented an alternative business plan that they hoped would become a model for other closing archdiocesan schools. The parents wanted the archdiocese to sell the school to community members at market value and turn the Oak Square building into a nonprofit school, a preschool and community center.

But on Thursday, Tom O'Brien, president of OLP's advisory school board, received the bad news.

"Archbishop Sean has decided that the Archdiocese will retain Our Lady of the Presentation School building for Archdiocesan needs, rather than dispose of it," said Lennon, declining the proposal in a short letter dated Jan. 11.

The five-sentence letter did not elaborate on how the archdiocese would use the building.

"For [the archdiocese] to send this curt, five sentence response, who's ever advising them should be fired," said McDermott. "Rasky Baerlein should be fired. It's just been one public relations disaster after another."

Last year, the archdiocese hired Rasky Baerlein as their public relation representative.

OLP parents said they felt the archdiocese was too quick to dismiss their five-month effort to formulate the proposal.

"What we would like is to have a meeting with Archbishop O'Malley because we haven't had a chance to come before him yet," said Jennifer Doyle, one of the OLP parents who authored the proposal.

In an outpouring of community support for the plan, at least 25 community associations sent letters in support of proposal to the archdiocese last month, including Mayor Thomas Menino, Boston City Council, the Brazilian Immigration Center, the Brighton-Allston Improvement Association and Boston University.

Boston College was the only entity OLP parents approached that did not offer support.


BC officials were not available for comment.


The 100-plus page "Oak Square Partnership for Youth and Families" proposal included a business plan; renovation blueprints; letters of support from community leaders; and studies supporting a community need for the project, including the Allston-Brighton Healthy Boston Coalition's Needs and Assets Assessment Report.


When the archdiocese announced OLP's closing last May, Tom O'Brien and a few OLP parents gathered at the Green Briar Pub to discuss the future of OLP.


"We started to think, 'If it's not going to be an archdiocese school, what could it be?' That's when we came up with the idea for an Oak Square campus," said O'Brien, the president of OLP's advisory school board.



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OLP parents estimated a \$3 million loan would cover the school purchase and building code renovations, such as handicapped ramps, eight added classroom bathrooms and an elevator. The city has assessed the value of OLP's school building at more than \$1.8 million.

Despite OLP's drop in enrollment, the parents' plan relies on tuition to fund the school's operation costs and pay the building's mortgage. Last year, OLP's student population shrank from 180 to 130 after the archdiocese announced the school's closing.

OLP grade-school students would continue to pay \$3,400 a month in enrollment fees, the same tuition as this year, according to the proposal. Parents would pay \$1,000 a month to enroll their 3- to 5-year-olds in the school's preschool program.

If the archdiocese had accepted the proposal, parents hoped to maximize use of the school's building space. Students currently use only nine of the 17 classrooms.

The proposal would have opened the school to 108 students in grades one to six. The school's second floor would be home to the six classrooms. Four classrooms on the first floor would house 54 preschoolers in a year-round day-care program. The preschool program would operate from 7:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. five days a week. The plan called for disbanding the school library. Students would have instead used the Faneuil Branch library which is a few steps away.

The first floor would also include a computer classroom and two classrooms leased by the YMCA for after-school, summer programs and classes. Each floor, including the basement, is designed to accommodate two multi-use classrooms. The multi-use classrooms could be used by community groups, including adult education.

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