

Church mum on sale

By Erin Smith/ Staff Writer
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If neighbors were expecting answers on the future of Oak Square, the Archdiocese of Boston offered few clues at a City Council hearing last week.

An attorney and a real estate manager for the archdiocese both showed little emotion as they refused to answer any questions, at one point even refusing to identify who they represented.

District Councilor Jerry P. McDermott, chairman of the Institutional Relations Committee, convened the hearing to determine better protection for neighborhoods against institutional expansion.

The panel of city councilors also investigated whether existing flaws in the institutional planning process had contributed to the closing of the Our Lady of the Presentation School in Brighton through land deals between the archdiocese and Boston College.

The decision to close OLP had "nothing to do with BC," said Dennis Donovan, real estate asset manager for the archdiocese, in a prepared statement.

The archdiocese decided to move its tribunal offices to the OLP school building "well after" the Metropolitan Tribunal building was sold to BC, said Donovan.

Church denies

Tom Keady, vice president of government relations, also denied BC played a role in OLP's shutting down.

Neighbors became angered last month when the archdiocese rejected a bid to sell the school to the community at market value in a curt, five-sentence letter. The group of residents wanted to turn the building into an elementary school, preschool and community center.

"Can you explain why a 150-page proposal from the very people who built this parish was not taken more seriously?" asked District City Councilor Maureen E. Feeney.

Donovan told Feeney he did not have an answer.

"He is not at liberty to answer questions," said attorney Michael J. Fazio Jr. "All we can do is listen to you today."

Feeney told the panel that the archdiocese, not universities, needed to be held accountable for not involving the community in church closings and land deals.

But District City Councilor Michael P. Ross contended universities worsened the problem. Bids by community groups and developers are meaningless if universities can offer the archdiocese double the price, said Ross.

Colleges, too

During the meeting, Ross begged Northeastern University representatives not to buy St. Ann's Parish in Fenway so that a developer could build more housing in the area.

District City Councilor James M. Kelly pledged to stop the archdiocese from turning closed churches and schools into luxury condominiums by introducing zoning that would permanently keep OLP and St. Peter's School in South Boston as school sites.

"I'm just so outraged by the arrogance of the archdiocese from the get-go," said Kelly, who accused Fazio and Donovan of stonewalling the proceedings with brief shrugs.

Even without Kelly's legislation, city officials said the archdiocese will need a zoning variance to bring offices to OLP.

Donovan testified that OLP was chosen to house the tribunal offices based on its close proximity to the Chancery at the archdiocese's Brighton campus.

But Keady told the panel that BC intends to own the entire Brighton campus by 2009.

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"If that's true, the words you've said about close proximity are empty," said OLP parent Thomas O'Brien.

Skeptical neighbors

Neighbors have been skeptical from the beginning that the tribunal is being permanently relocated to OLP and fear the school will eventually be sold to developers. The archdiocese has refused to say how long the tribunal will stay in the OLP building.

Kevin Carragee, chairman of Presentation School Foundation, asked Fazio why the tribunal could not instead relocate to a smaller space, such as the nearby OLP rectory. The three-floor school building is excessive space for the tribunal's 22 employees, especially with only eight working on location at the offices, said Carragee.

Archdiocesan officials refused to tell the TAB the number of staff or space used by the tribunal, citing "proprietary" concerns, but the churches Web site lists 24 employees.

McDermott suggested BC prove its goodwill by leasing the tribunal building back to the archdiocese for two years, while BC plans for the use of the land. But even if BC made the offer, it's unclear if the archdiocese could pay the rent.

Financial troubles have plagued the archdiocese since the clergy sex abuse scandal erupted in 2002.

More debts

Suffolk County deed records show the archdiocese mortgaged the Brighton campus in September 2002 for undisclosed sum to the Connecticut Knights of Columbus. When people or businesses are short of cash, they typically take out a second mortgage on a piece of property they already own.

The current agreement includes funding for 2101-2125 Commonwealth Ave., according to the Registry of Deeds. The Metropolitan Tribunal building was also financed by the Knights until June 24, 2004, the day before the archdiocese sold more than half of its Brighton Campus to BC.

City councilors also called for the archdiocese to be more open in its land deals.

The archdiocese has not stated its plans for the archdiocesan-owned land surrounding OLP School. The property incorporates seven parcels of land, including Our Lady of the Presentation Church which closed last summer.

But one developer has already expressed interest in buying OLP property.

Builder Merrill Diamond said he had not seen the church yet, but might be interested in partnering with Edward Fish to develop the property. Fish teamed up with the archdiocese in 2000 to build on the former St. John of God Hospital.

"I'm sure when the church property comes up for bid in Oak Square, it would be something we'd be interested in looking at," said Diamond.

Diamond is developing luxury condominiums in the Chestnut Hill Reservoir Waterworks buildings, and last week said he placed a bid to buy Blessed Sacrament Church in Cambridgeport.

McDermott postponed the hearing until later to give the archdiocese time to answer the panel's questions.

"We can't promise a response to this forum or any other forum," said Fazio.

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