

Cities, churches tussle over landmark status: Great old buildings

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When a church is deemed no longer viable and is ordered to be closed, who gets to decide what happens to the building?

Catholic dioceses in Ohio and Massachusetts are resisting moves by local officials to apply landmark designations to shuttered churches, saying such moves raise issues of religious freedom and expression.

Landmark advocates, meanwhile, say they are preserving the historic character of neighborhoods—a concern that isn't always shared by bishops preoccupied with shrinking budgets and dwindling numbers of priests.

On December 29, the City Council in Springfield, Massachusetts, voted unanimously to designate Our Lady of Hope Catholic church as part of a historic district. Built in 1925, the Italian Renaissance-style church boasts the tallest bell tower in Springfield.

Then in early January, the city's Historical Commission recommended that a second church, Immaculate Conception, also be named part of a historic district.

On January 21, the Diocese of Springfield filed suit to stop the designation, accusing lawmakers of acting out of "unnecessary haste" and "political expediency."

Designating church buildings as landmarks over the objection of church leaders is "a serious threat to our ability to control church buildings, including very clear religious symbols—a control which protects our religious freedom and expression," diocesan spokesman Mark Dupont said in a statement.

The four-county diocese has announced plans to shutter about one-fourth of its 101 churches. "The population has fallen by one-third in our diocese as the industrial base has declined. The bishop is determined to right-size the diocese in terms of parishes and not overextend our priests," Dupont said in an interview.

The legal dispute represents a new wrinkle in traditional church-state disputes. The designation for Our Lady of Hope includes statues and crosses—and the government has no right telling churches what to do with such religious items, Dupont said.

“If we don’t defend this right,” he added, “every city and town could tell churches what they can and can’t do.”

A similar fight has erupted in Cleveland, where Catholic leaders plan to close about 50 churches.

Rebuffing the diocese’s claim that the proposals were “extremely offensive,” the city’s Landmarks Commission recently recommended that six more Catholic churches be designated as historical city landmarks—adding them to a list of 31 Catholic churches already so designated.

Councilman Anthony Brancatelli, who is sponsoring five of the six designations, said he found the church’s response “a tad unusual.” He added: “These are absolutely beautiful churches architecturally. Whether they like it or not, this is the step we have to take. We’re going to hear it in council and we’re going to pass it.”

Last March, the Cleveland City Council moved to landmark not just the exteriors, but also the interiors, of shuttered churches. “I will not stand for stained-glass windows to be boarded up,” said Councilwoman Dona Brady. “And many churches have built-in icons. These have got to stay there.”

Robert Tayek, a spokesman for the Diocese of Cleveland, said the situation has not yet moved into lawsuit territory. Interior landmarking, he added, “raises a bigger question” under the First Amendment than the already contentious fight over preserving a church’s outward appearance.

In Springfield, Massachusetts, Catholic spokesman Dupont noted that the diocese has found new roles for many former churches, including as sites for affordable housing and artisan galleries. Some churches have been sold to other denominations and remained worship spaces.

Ironically, Dupont said, designating church buildings as landmarks would discourage developers from finding such creative new uses.

Avoiding the confrontational nature of landmarking is part of the mandate of Partners for Sacred Places, a Philadelphia-based organization that gathers

denominations, architects and community leaders to explore new uses for churches.

“We are about making the most of these great old buildings and finding a smooth transition to a use that keeps the public value,” said Partners executive director Robert Jaeger. In a Partners project in Detroit, for instance, a former church became a Polish history center. *-Religion News Service*