

Supes seek to save St. Brigid Church

Landmark status could thwart archdiocese plan to raze, sell land to pay abuse suits

Suzanne Herel
Chronicle Staff Writer
San Francisco Chronicle
February 3, 2005

The San Francisco Board of Supervisors wants to label the long-closed St. Brigid Catholic Church a local historic landmark in an effort to thwart the archdiocese's plan to demolish the building and sell the land to pay off settlements of priest abuse cases.

Supervisor Michela Alioto-Pier, who represents District 2, where the church sits at Broadway and Van Ness Avenue, introduced a resolution Tuesday urging the Landmarks Preservation Advisory Board to consider an official historic designation for the structure, built in Richardsonian Romanesque style in 1900. The measure has enough co-sponsors to pass at the board meeting Tuesday.

But Maurice Healy, a spokesman for the Archdiocese of San Francisco, said that even if the church does become a historic landmark, it won't affect the archdiocese's plan to sell the building to a developer who intends to erect condominiums on that corner.

Under state law, Healy said, religious organizations are permitted to reject landmark status -- as the archdiocese already did in this case with the national and state registers of historic places -- and do what they like with the buildings they own.

It's unclear, however, how state law would pertain to a local historic designation, said Joe Dignan, chairman of the Committee to Save St. Brigid Church.

Alioto-Pier says she's convinced her resolution could make a difference.

In any case, she said, "We need to do whatever we can. It means a lot to people in San Francisco, and it does have historic value."

The church was closed in 1994 after being deemed seismically unsafe in the wake of the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, and Healy said that an estimated \$5 million to \$7 million would be needed to make the building able to withstand future tremors.

The committee wants to raise that amount and work with the archdiocese to retrofit and reopen the church, Dignan said.

The issue has a new sense of urgency to it, as church officials met in January with the city Planning Department to discuss the sale of the land to what Healy called an "unsolicited buyer."

Healy said that he doesn't have a lot of faith in the ability of the group to raise the money, because it has had a decade to do so.

"Even if they came back and said, 'We have the money to retrofit it,' I think our answer would be, 'No, the church is not needed now.'" he said.

Meanwhile, what the archdiocese does need is money to settle claims by alleged victims of sexual abuse by clergy and church employees, Healy said.

The archdiocese is involved in about 75 such lawsuits, either alone or with another diocese.

The governing church body is preparing for an experience similar to that of the Diocese of Orange in Orange County, which recently settled about 90 cases for \$100 million, Healy said.

"As the lay people who sit on the real estate committee say, 'How are we going to handle this pending burden?' The sale of unneeded property has been seen as the way to go," Healy said.

Dignan said his committee has a meeting scheduled with Archbishop William Levada on Feb. 18 in which he expects his group to be asked to acquiesce to the demolition of St. Brigid in favor of more housing in San Francisco.

"The answer to that will be a very polite and very respectful 'No,' " he said.