

Buyer cancels sale of Canandaigua convent

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

A proposed sale of the historic convent of St. Mary's Parish was cancelled Aug. 22 due to strong opposition from neighbors and parishioners.

The sale, approved by the parish council and Bishop Matthew H. Clark earlier this spring, was voluntarily cancelled by the purchaser, Charles Zanghi, a Canandaigua developer, at an afternoon meeting with parish representatives.

The sale's cancellation was officially announced that night at a meeting of the city Planning Commission, which had scheduled a public hearing on plans to subdivide the convent from the parish property and to convert the building into offices.

Father James Burke, St. Mary's pastor, has asked an ad hoc committee to study possible uses for the convent and expenses that renovation of the Greek Revival-style building might entail. The committee will deliver a preliminary report to the parish council at a special session scheduled for Sept. 7. Committee members said they would like to have a final proposal ready within the next four months.

As part of the agreement to cancel the sale, Zanghi retains the right of first refusal should the ad hoc committee determine that the building should be sold.

Zanghi, who had offered \$165,000 for the building, said that although he had a valid, signed contract for the purchase and could have fought the cancellation, he opted not to. "You have to be realistic," he explained. "With that much opposition, the planning board was not going to allow (the subdivision) to happen."

The sale originally had been approved after five years of parish discussion of options for the building. The convent, purchased in 1873 to provide a home for women religious teaching in the parish school, had fallen into disrepair in recent years and required expensive maintenance. In addition, it was too large for the four Sisters of St. Joseph who currently live there. Money from the sale was to be used to provide alternate housing for the sisters.

Opposition did not surface until after the sale had been announced in May. According to Joan Geise, one of the leaders of the group opposing the sale and co-chair of the ad hoc committee, "Basically no one knew too much about it until the site plan became available."

Geise said the plan showed that the building was to be turned into offices, and that the parking lot — including a section used as a play area for students at the parish school — was to be expanded to accommodate approximately 20 employees. Neighbors also feared increased traffic



Linda Dow Hayes/Catholic Courier

The sale of St. Mary's Convent in Canandaigua was cancelled last Tuesday in response to protests by neighbors and parishioners who did not want to see the building converted into an office complex.

volume in the area because of the offices.

Once plans for the convent became known, people began to contact the parish to raise questions and to voice opposition. At the time, Father Burke was on U.S. Army Reserve duty at Fort Drum. During the two weeks following announcement of the impending sale, the parish's business manager, Stephen Tempest, called him three times to update the situation.

Up until that time, Father Burke explained, he had been unaware that the sale would be opposed. He noted that parishioners discussed options for the convent since 1984, and that the decision to sell had been a last resort. "Really, the bottom line of the whole thing is the money," he said. "If we had the money, we wouldn't be thinking of selling it."

Lack of funds may in fact prevent the parish from being able to renovate the building. Zanghi pointed out that, according to law, if the building is used for any purposes other than as a convent, the parish would be required to bring the property up to current building codes. Depending on how the building is to be used, he estimated, repairs and renovations needed could run from \$200,000-\$500,000.

Jim Rulison, who began voicing opposition to the sale even before it became final and who will co-chair the ad hoc committee, said those opposed to the sale are aware of the potential cost. "We feel that it won't be too out of reach to raise \$200,000-\$300,000 for repairs," he said. "We are prepared for someone coming back and saying that it's going to cost a lot of money."

Rulison pointed out that since the oppo-

sition surfaced, a number of parishioners and concerned community members had already volunteered their services. Those people include contractors, painters and carpenters who have offered their help. Such volunteerism, he predicted, could help to keep costs down.

"Our aim," Rulison said, "is to make it so the convent is a self-contained and contributing factor in the parish."

The convent's long history as part of the parish is, in fact, one factor that led to such strong opposition to the sale, Geise noted. "A lot of people have very strong emotional feelings about it," she said.

If possible, Geise said, people would like to see the building used by the parish for

offices and parish ministries, adding that if space is rented out, it should be to "compatible groups ... in keeping with the religious, educational nature of the thing."

Father Burke applauded the interest the group has shown. "Maybe there's a new hope here — a new spark that will give some time and interest, and help us solve the problem," he said. "Certainly people will be more aware of the problems than there were in the past."

The pastor noted, however, that the parish's financial concerns extend beyond the convent. The parish is in the process of finishing a \$600,000 renovation of the church, and pledges in that campaign will be collected up until next April. In addition, the parish is facing a \$50,000 bill for a new organ, and repairs to the rectory, school and parking lot.

"You've got to think of an overall picture of the parish," he said.

Father Burke said that groups in the parish were focusing on the different problems the parish faces, and he speculated that discussions about the convent will "give us a good vehicle for people to learn more about the parish. It really could turn out beneficial to the parish, not only for the financial aspect, but for the different groups in the parish to hear each other."

The ad hoc committee may ultimately determine that the parish will still have to sell the convent, Father Burke acknowledged. "But at least we will have exhausted every option," he concluded.

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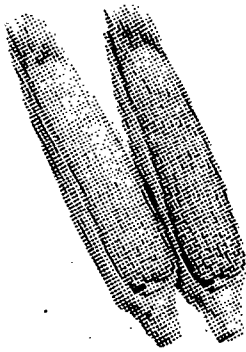
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