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Officials fight to save St. James

Proposed legislation supports parishioners' appeal of bishop's closure order

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LAKEWOOD — As St. James parishioners fight Bishop Richard Lennon's decision to close the church next year, City Hall is supporting their cause and looking for ways to protect the towering stone cathedral.

Two pieces of proposed legislation in front of City Council would support parishioners' appeal to the Vatican and prohibit the diocese, or any future owner, from demolishing the church or stripping its interior. By including the public interiors of properties under the protection of historic designation districts and historic properties, the city is hoping to preserve the ornate decoration

of the church as well as other significant structures.

"I wish we had the power to do more because I think it would be an absolute tragedy to lose this church, and not just for Catholics or for the parish, but for everybody," said Mayor Ed FitzGerald. "You don't have to be Catholic to understand that this is going to have a negative

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impact on the whole western end of Lakewood both in terms of service and vibrancy that the parish provides."

Following the bishop's decision to close the doors, church members formed the "Save Saint James" group.

"We just want to display all the beautiful artwork from the parish and some of the history, and raise awareness about our situation," said 40-year parishioner and group chair Toni Sabo.

Parishioners are also trying to make it known that they do not believe their parish fits the criteria used by Lennon when deciding which parishes would merge and which would close.

"We're still a growing parish," Sabo said, noting that the congregation added 225 families between 2008 and 2009. "We're really grateful for the support we're getting from the city and it's good to know we have wide community support throughout Lakewood. We know this is a community treasure and we're glad council sees that as well."

Parish member Tom Hayden agrees.

"This is a challenging intersection between civic and spiritual and religious issues here," said Hayden of the legislation. "I think the key thing is that (Lennon) doesn't understand Lakewood and he doesn't understand what Lakewood is in terms of an inner ring suburb. I think if he could understand more about what Lakewood is, we wouldn't have this issue."

The congregation members, more than 1,400 strong, have

not been stingy when chipping in to maintain the church's interior or exterior over the past few years. Parishioners pooled their resources for a new organ last year to celebrate the church's centennial anniversary and pledged about \$700,000 to fix the leaking roof. Unfortunately, the organ was hit by lightning this summer, rendering it unusable and the church is now using an organ on loan from the company.

FitzGerald himself spoke privately with Lennon in March in what he called a "less than spiritual" meeting and is not optimistic that the bishop will reverse his decision, but the St. James family still has hope.

"I think all things are possible with God and we've been praying nonstop and doing rosaries every week," Sabo said. "We're still hopeful that we can sway the bishop to change

his mind."

U.S. Rep. Dennis Kucinich, D-10, is recommending the use of something similar to the eminent domain for historic preservation plan developed by Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson.

"The deeds of title to the churches belong to the Diocese of Cleveland, but the rich cultural, ethnic and religious history belong to the people of Cleveland," he wrote in a letter to Jackson, naming several Cleveland churches including St. Rose of Lima, St. James's mother church St. Patrick (West Park) and SS. Philip and James.

"I believe this is a perfect opportunity for the city to use eminent domain for the purpose of historic preservation of these churches," Kucinich said.

He also proposed that that the city could then lease the churches back to interested

groups.

But the legislation could spark a legal battle over property rights.

"Any time the government encroaches on landowners' ability to do something with their property should cause some concern and it has to be done carefully but I think this strikes the right balance," said Ward 1 Councilman Kevin Butler, co-sponsor of the legislation.

"There is a chance that there could be a legal challenge with this from the diocese," FitzGerald said.

The diocese has not announced any plans for the twin-towered church and has not yet seen the legislation, said Robert Tayek, diocese director of public relations.

The legislation will remain under the consideration of City Council for the time being, but FitzGerald is hoping to "fast track" it into law.