



November 13, 2012

City of Rochester  
Zoning Board of Appeals  
Joseph O'Donnell, Chair  
City Hall - Room 125B  
Rochester, New York 14614

RE: 660 W Main St.

Dear Members of the Zoning Board of Appeals:

Thank you for requesting The Landmark Society's comments on the proposed project to demolish the historic church and construct a new Dollar General store at 660 West Main Street. We stand in firm support of the many residents and property owners in the immediate area of the church who oppose demolition. For the reasons outlined below, we ask that you deny the variance to demolish a Designated Building of Historic Value:

#### **Significance as a Designated Building of Historic Value**

The church building's classification as a Designated Building of Historic Value (DBHV) has already established that it is significant and worthy of preservation. The City's Zoning Code prohibits demolition of a DBHV, unless the applicant meets the six conditions established in Section 120-195. We do not believe that the owner has met any of these criteria:

1. Benefits: While the applicant may benefit, demolition will be to the great detriment of the community and neighborhood.
2. Essential character of the area: Replacing an architecturally significant historic masonry building with a larger, rectangular box constructed of lower quality materials will significantly change the character of the area.
3. No other remedy: Other remedies, such as adaptive use, are available and do not appear to have been fully explored.
4. Significance: The variance is substantial, resulting in the removal of two buildings and their replacement with a larger building of an entirely different character.
5. Physical and environmental conditions: The proposed variance will have a significant adverse impact on the neighborhood environment, replacing a religious building with a large commercial building and parking lot.
6. Not self-created: The current owner has not maintained or repaired the property since he took ownership in 2011.

## **Community Impact & Streetscape**

Demolition and replacement with a building of far inferior quality and design would be a detriment to the streetscape and the surrounding community, particularly in light of ongoing and successful revitalization efforts that are occurring on either side of 660 W. Main. To the west, DePaul has created compatible modern infill and the Coptic Monastery has maintained the important historic buildings at the former St. Peter and Paul campus. To the east, millions of dollars have been invested in rehab and new construction. Additional investment is expected in the coming years as Buckingham Properties and DePaul Key Housing invest in the rehab of former factory buildings in the Susan B. Anthony Neighborhood. With growing interest in downtown and walkable urban neighborhoods, it is simply a matter of time before investment and demand spread to this section of West Main.

## **Building Condition**

The existing historic building appears to be structurally sound. The c.1870 building is constructed of solid masonry walls that can withstand many years of neglect before becoming structurally unsound. Aside from unsightly maintenance issues such as peeling paint, when viewed from the exterior the largest issue appears to be areas of the roof in need of repair or replacement. Although Landmark Society staff were denied access to the interior of the building to inspect its condition, photos of the interior appear to indicate that water infiltration has caused some rotting plaster, drywall, and wood framing in the basement. There are significant maintenance and repair issues to be sure, however, they do not constitute a “blighted premise” nor do they render the building “no longer feasible for any use” as stated in the report prepared by Mr. Louie Carini, PE.

A lack of maintenance since Mr. Maye assumed ownership has left the building in its current state. Granting an area variance to allow demolition will simply encourage other property owners throughout the city to neglect their buildings, allowing them to deteriorate beyond repair.

The reports that the owner has submitted in support of demolition (completed by Professional Engineer, Louie Carini and Mossien Associates Architects, P.C.) do not justify demolition. We believe that a second opinion on the structural integrity of the building, at a minimum, is warranted. Mr. Carini does not provide sufficient evidence to support his determinations that the buildings are “unsafe and dangerous... a blighted premise... a hazard to the public health, safety or welfare...obsolete...” Such words tend to be emotionally charged and reflect an emotional reaction to the building’s condition rather than describing the actual physical condition, structural integrity, and reuse potential. Further documentation and investigation is needed before determining that the building is a hazard or beyond rehabilitation.

To that end, we have awarded a grant of \$1500 from our new Preservation Grant Fund program to the Susan B. Anthony Neighborhood Association to assist in funding an analysis and report by a structural engineer.

## **Redevelopment & Adaptive Use Potential**

The documentation and reports that Mr. Maye has submitted in support of his application for an area variance suggest that he may not have fully explored resale or reuse potential.

While a significant rehabilitation is needed, there is no reason the building could not be adapted to a new use. If the market does not support a complete rehabilitation at this time, the building could be temporarily

stabilized until a new owner or occupant comes forward. Successful rehabs throughout Rochester and in many other cities have demonstrated the adaptability of religious buildings. Even large national retailers have successfully adapted historic church buildings to meet their needs.

While we do not believe a Dollar General is the ideal use in this location, placing such a store inside an existing historic building that relates to the streetscape and surrounding buildings would serve the city of Rochester much better than a generic new building. While we acknowledge that not every historic building can or should be saved, we believe that in the case of 660 W. Main, the condition of the building, the concerns of the neighborhood, and the successful revitalization occurring just east of this property, make reuse a realistic option that merits further consideration.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,



Wayne Goodman  
Executive Director



Caitlin Meives  
Preservation Planner