

Bill forces closed churches to keep up interiors

Michael O'Malley Religion News Service | Mar. 9, 2009

CLEVELAND -- Faced with closings of Catholic churches in their neighborhoods, frustrated City Council members March 4 moved to toughen the city's historical-landmark law as a way to preserve the empty structures.

Currently, the city's historical landmark law protects only exteriors of historic buildings, but a council committee voted to introduce by March 16 legislation to protect interiors of historical landmarks, including closed churches.

The action came just 10 days before the Cleveland Catholic Diocese will announce the closings of nearly 50 churches, mostly in inner-city neighborhoods.

The diocese has said some churches will be torn down. But if a church is designated by the city as a historical landmark, it can't be demolished or architecturally altered without permission from the city's Landmarks Commission.

In Cleveland, 28 Catholic churches have been designated as Cleveland historical landmarks. Legislation is pending to landmark three more.

"We think of these churches as houses of worship, but they're also part of the basic foundations of our communities," Councilman Michael Polensek told the committee. "They have a great impact on neighborhood stability. We need to protect these structures."

Polensek noted that council is powerless to stop the church closings, but "what we can do," he said, "is protect our neighborhoods," adding that council needs to send a message: "You're not going to desecrate our neighborhoods," he thundered.

The diocese has said it will remove sacred artifacts, including altars, statues and stained-glass windows, from empty structures. But council members are hoping to keep interiors intact so that the empty buildings will hold their values for the market.

"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."

Diocese spokesman Robert Tayek declined to comment on the council committee's move, saying, "We haven't seen the legislation and it has not been discussed with anybody here."

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