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Kucinich advises Cleveland seize at risk churches

Michael O'Malley Religion News Service | Sep. 18, 2009

CLEVELAND -- Aiming to protect the city's ethnic history and the future of its neighborhoods, Rep. Dennis Kucinich, D-Ohio, is calling on Cleveland officials to seize closed Catholic churches by eminent domain.

City Hall, however, is not saying whether it would consider such a drastic move.

"We are at work on options for reuse of these valuable assets," said Ken Silliman, chief of staff to Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson. "We will advise the mayor and the congressman and work with his office. But I'm making no comment on eminent domain as a strategy."

Silliman declined to say what options the city is considering for the closed structures. Several members of the City Council have proposed designating the buildings as historic landmarks to prevent them from being razed.

The latest casualty in a downsizing by the Cleveland Catholic Diocese was St. Procop Catholic Church, a 137-year-old Czech-founded parish that was closed last month.

Besides mothballing the 110-year-old church building, the closing uprooted a number of social-service programs, including free meals and groceries for the neighborhood poor.

A diocese spokesman said the diocese and Catholic Charities are working to fill the gap with similar services.

Kucinich, a Democrat and two-time presidential candidate, wants the city to take ownership of St. Procop and other closed churches, leasing them back to groups that would operate social-service and cultural programs, which, he said, are "so important to the vitality of Cleveland's neighborhoods."

In a letter to Jackson this month, Kucinich wrote: "Churches now slated for closure and possible demolition have been gathering places for immigrants seeking both religious and political freedom.

"The deeds of title to the churches belong to the Diocese of Cleveland, but the rich cultural, ethnic and religious history belongs to the people of Cleveland. In the final analysis, it is the history of our city that is threatened."

The letter noted that Kucinich and Jackson met and discussed the matter on Labor Day.

"As I mentioned in our discussion, I believe that this is a perfect opportunity for the city to use eminent domain for the purpose of historic preservation of these churches," Kucinich wrote.

The diocese had no immediate response to Kucinich's proposal.

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