

Builder gets OK to raze historic chapel at Barat

By Lisa Black
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With the Lake Forest City Council's blessing, developer Robert Shaw will demolish a building wing containing the historic Sacred Heart Chapel at the former Barat College campus.

The City Council unanimously approved Shaw's tentative development plan, including demolition of the Thabor wing, despite impassioned objections from dozens of people, some of whom held up poster-size photographs of the chapel outside Village Hall before the Monday night meeting.

"I am delighted that we are moving forward with the next of many more steps," Shaw said after the four-hour standing-room-only session.

Aldermen said Lake Forest's preservation ordinance protects only the exterior of buildings, not interiors such as the chapel, before they voted 8-0 to overrule the city's Historic Preservation Commission. In September the commission refused to approve demolition of the 83-year-old chapel, built for the Catholic Sisters of the Sacred Heart.

The City Council also approved a special permit for Shaw's \$125 million development, called Barat Woods. His plan calls for 120 condominiums, town homes and row houses on the 23-acre site at 700 E. Westleigh Rd.

Shaw said he was not sure how quickly he would be able to obtain a demolition permit and begin construction.

The wing with the chapel, named one of the state's top 10 endangered historic objects by the preservation advocacy group Landmarks Illinois, will be razed to make way for underground parking.

"I think they have turned the preservation of Lake Forest on its head," resident Liz Moore said after the vote.

"I am very disappointed that the City Council can't respect the history of our community and preserve the Thabor wing," resident Patricia Riess said.

The Barat development will preserve the south lawn and parts of Old Main, the 200,000-square-foot building that contains the Thabor wing. Old Main will be converted to about 50 apartments.

"My fear is if we do not permit the wing to be demolished, we sacrifice the rest of Old Main," said Ald. Stuart Widman. He encouraged people to pursue talks with Shaw if they want to keep fighting to save the chapel.

"If you want to see the chapel preserved, get your act together and put your dimes on the table," he said.

But preservationists said city officials could have saved the chapel if they had the will. Organizers collected about 2,000 signatures on a petition to oppose demolition.

"It all comes down to the importance that City Council currently places on historic resources in Lake Forest," said David Bahlman, president of Landmarks Illinois. "To me it is unthinkable that a developer with 23 acres couldn't have come up with a plan that saved the wing and the chapel."

When asked if he received any serious offers to help convert the chapel for public use, such as a concert hall, Shaw said, "Not even a frivolous offer."

No one, including Shaw, has disputed the chapel's historical, architectural and cultural value. But Shaw said he found no suitable uses for the chapel. "It's a money pit forever," said Shaw, who estimated that it would cost \$10 million to renovate the chapel and \$200,000 annually for maintenance.

The Catholic Sisters of the Sacred Heart opened the college in 1904, adding the Thabor wing in 1924. DePaul University bought the college in 2001 but closed it four years later. Shaw bought the property in January 2006.

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