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Fight to save house comes to an end

BY BRENDA SULLIVAN ReminderNews

One woman's fight to save an old house on Main Street has come to an end.



What was once the W.P. Quish Funeral Home at the corner of Main and Hollister streets, a building Manchester Historical Society member Eileen Sweeney refers to as a "landmark" in town, was being demolished as of Monday, Dec. 14.

Built in the 1920s, the English cottage-style house was purchased several months ago for \$250,000 by the Northeast Family Credit Union, which occupies a building next door.

It was sold by Main Street Management, based in Marlborough, and was vacant for at least the last two years.

The house lot will be used for parking and, when the economic climate improves, for expansion of the bank building, credit union President and CEO Joanne Todd said last week.

Todd noted that the credit union has been at its location for 30 years and that by buying this property for future expansion, it will be able to stay in town and on Main Street. The bank building was completed in December 1979, she said.

Todd said that while the two-story house may be interesting because of its age, "the roof is in terrible shape... it has been renovated quite extensively, and it hasn't been maintained very well."

The building would have come down sooner, but demolition had to be postponed when Sweeney invoked a town ordinance that allows a citizen to request a three-month period to allow for public comment. The ordinance applies to buildings that are at least 50 years old and a minimum of 500 square feet.

Sweeney notified the town of her objections in July, so the three-month stay expired about two months ago.

Sweeney had hoped to get more support for her protest. To date, she knows of only one letter of protest sent to the town by a resident, Frances Aceto of Woodland Street.



Sweeney recalled that the fight to save the Bennet School was considered a “done deal” right up until the last minute, but those who wanted to preserve the campus finally prevailed.

As for the old funeral home, “It really is a landmark,” Sweeney said. “It creates a nice sense of place.”

“I hate to see these houses come down, little by little,” she said. “I think we need to reevaluate our process, because once a building is gone, it’s gone.”

Sweeney tried to persuade credit union administrators to consider repairing the house and using it for offices. “That section of Main Street has a lot of older homes that have been adapted to use as businesses. That’s nice, because it preserves the character of the town,” she said.

Although Sweeney is a member of the Manchester Historical Society, she did not have its support on this issue. Historical Society President John Dormer said last week that the old funeral home doesn’t have real historic significance, “other than it’s nicely designed, and it’s been on Main Street a long time.”

“But it’s not on an historic register, and it’s not associated with a prominent historic figure or family,” he said.

Still, the Historic Society doesn’t like to see old homes on Main Street torn down. “The older buildings help preserve the appearance of the town’s Main Street, certainly better than a parking lot,” Dormer said. “But Eileen is doing this [protest] as a private citizen.”

The contractor hired by the credit union to demolish the old funeral home saw enough value in its architectural elements that he tried to find a way to relocate the building.

Kevin Martin of Tolland-based Martin Demolition said last week that he did find another lot a little more than a mile away – the site of a hardware store that burned down – but that other costs made the project too expensive.

“The lot would have cost between \$50,000 and \$80,000, but it also is nonconforming, and we would have had to apply for variances,” he said.

Other costs would include \$60,000 to physically move the house, about \$70,000 to refurbish it to make it habitable, in addition to pouring a new foundation, and an indeterminate cost for moving fiber optic communications lines used by the hospital in order to move the house down Main Street.

“We’re talking about hundreds of thousands of dollars, and the house is only worth \$250,000... so, the house was doomed,” Martin said.

Even though it is too late to save this house, Sweeney said she hopes town residents will take notice and take action to preserve Manchester’s history.

"At the very least, by my trying to stop this, it might be educational. The next time, maybe more people will speak up," she said.

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