

WOONSOCKET/NORTH SMITHFIELD

Church eyes storefront home

Mayor opposes move because it would take building from tax rolls

By RUSS OLIVO
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WOONSOCKET — Mayor Susan D. Menard has come out against a zoning variance to allow a growing Arnold Street church to move into the former Parenteau Furniture Store, saying the move would make 60 North Main St. tax exempt and rob the city of an important commercial building.

The Harvest Community Church has been located at 198 Arnold St. for about six months, but Pastor Gene Giguere says the parish, a welcome neighbor in a neighborhood nagged by street crime, is already starting to outgrow the building, a former bar shut down for drug dealing.

"We're just at the point where we've run out of room," said Giguere. "We didn't expect the kind of growth we're experiencing so quickly."

Citing the proximity of other churches on North Main, Giguere said the assembly is so confident of gaining Zoning Board approval for a variance to worship in the vacant furniture store that it has already committed to buying the building. Thus, he said, if Menard wants to keep the building on the tax rolls, it's already too late: Whether or not the church moves in, the site will still become tax exempt church property.

Giguere said there is already another church just 8 feet away from the Parenteau building, sharing the headquarters of the Woonsocket Teachers Guild. He said it would be "arbitrary" for the Zoning Board to allow that

church but not the Harvest Community Church, a roughly 75-member non-denominational church that welcomes worshippers of all faiths.

"We don't want controversy," said Giguere. "We want to be good members of the community and good citizens. We'll pay anything we have to under the law. We just want a church that's big enough to serve our needs."

Earlier this week, however, Menard said she is opposed to allowing the church to take over Parenteau Furniture. One issue, she said, is that the city is trying to curtail the loss of privately owned, tax-paying properties from the tax rolls, a problem the mayor has raised often, arguing that the city shoulders more than its fair share of tax-exempt non-profits. But she said it is also important to retain the site for potential commercial investment from the private sector.

"For purposes of zoning and planning, it should remain a commercial building," the mayor said.

The Zoning Board is slated to consider granting the owner of the building, Phetpaseuth Ratsapho of 318 Second Ave., a variance for the site on Dec. 11. The board tabled it without any discussion after the board found itself without a quorum several weeks ago.

In his application for the variance, Ratsapho told officials that he has been trying to find a commercial or retail buyer for the 12,700-square-foot site for more than a year. But potential suitors complain that the building is either too big to suit their needs,



Call Photo/Paul Lepre

A sign in the window of the former Parenteau Furniture Store on North Main Street, Woonsocket, announcing the 'Future Home of the Harvest Community Church' may be premature. Mayor Susan D. Menard has come out against the zoning variance needed for the relocation of the church, but proponents of the move say there are other churches in the area, including one just 8 feet away.

or lacks sufficient motor vehicle and foot traffic to justify the investment.

Because of the shortcomings of the site, Ratsapho said, he will plead a case for a permit based on economic hardship.

"Despite a diligent and bona fide effort to sell, the premises has been marketed for about one year and has been vacant for over two," he said, adding "the lot and building contained thereon cannot yield any beneficial use if required to conform to the provisions of the zoning ordinance."

Paul Hurteau, of 190 Arnold St., who has appeared before the City Council at least five times in recent months to complain about drunks, drug dealers and prosti-

tutes in the neighborhood, says the church is one of the area's bright spots and he'll hate to see it go.

"Every Sunday my parking lot is full and so is their landlord, John Carriere's," said Hurteau. "They're the nicest bunch of people you'd ever want to meet."

Giguere said, "There obviously is a crime problem on Arnold Street," but the church had never been adversely affected. In fact, he said, "We were there to be available to those people" and that's one reason for selecting a new site in close proximity, on North Main. Giguere said the church membership has grown to about a third since moving to Arnold Street, in the former Asian Club.