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Groups looking to save Cambria City churches

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CAMBRIA CITY — Organizers say the effort to save three recently closed Catholic churches is a unique collaborative project with national implications. A series of workshops designed to chart the future of those structures is under way.

More than 60 people joined project partners for the first session at the Heritage Discovery Center on Thursday to find new uses for Immaculate Conception, St. Columba and Ss. Casimir and Emerich churches.

All three were closed in 2009 when the archdiocese of Altoona merged congregations as a cost-saving measure. The merged congregations were renamed the Resurrection Catholic Church and meet at St. Rochus Church in Johnstown.

“This is such an important moment for everybody in this neighborhood, and in Johnstown, and, quite frankly, it’s an important moment for the nation. The eyes of America are on us,” Robert Jaeger, executive director of Partners for Sacred Places said.

“No one has really attempted in 20 years to look at a group of important, vacant, historic, sacred places and think about how they could remain active and vital in the city and to city life in a new way and do it in such an exciting way with architects and city leaders coming together,” he said.

Partners for Sacred Places, a nonprofit organization based in Philadelphia, has been retained to help lead the workshop and summarize the results.

More than \$18,000 has been raised by various local groups like Save Our Steeples and the Johnstown Regional Partnership to conduct the study, which will continue through Saturday.

“It came to a point where we had to figure something out. I think early on we thought we’re not going to go down without a fight,” Marie Mock of Save Our Steeples said. The group sold books, apparel, luminaries and held concerts for more than two years to raise the money.

Now the challenge will be to find preservation funding and perhaps private investors willing to help turn the historic structures into community buildings, arts centers, businesses or residences.

Preferably the churches will be incorporated into the fabric of the community while preserving the interior architecture and continue to reflect their history as well, Forest Tuomi of Partners for Sacred Places said.

“What’s happening in these churches should help lift the whole community. A lot of churches are reused for a variety of purposes. This should be a symbiotic relationship with the neighborhood,” Tuomi said.

Larry Sutton, chief financial officer of the diocese, said that finding a new use for the buildings is a priority. “We’re willing to let these buildings go for a dollar if that’s what it takes,” he said.

For more information visit www.freewebs.com/saveoursteeples or www.jaha.org online.

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