

Bosley Wants More Dialogue on Church Closings

Staff reports - August 13, 2008

iBerkshires (www.iberkshires.com)

NORTH ADAMS — State Rep. Daniel E. Bosley is calling for further dialogue between parishioners, local officials and the Roman Catholic Diocese of Springfield before the diocese implements its plan to close churches in Berkshire County.

Parishes throughout four of the diocese's districts were informed of the changes during Masses over the weekend; Bishop Timothy A. McDonnell confirmed on Monday the six closings in Berkshire County.

In a news release Tuesday, the North Adams Democrat questioned whether the church officials really listened to parishioners and took into account the historical significance of the churches as religious and community centers. The closings were "short-sighted," he said.

"My point is that these churches mean more to the community than just as a religious center," Bosley responded in an e-mail about his call for a moratorium on church closures. "They are a center for our heritage and history. They have a meaning to certain ethnic groups and have an identification to our communities."

In North County, St. Francis of Assisi and Our Lady of Mercy churches will close and their parishes merge with St. Anthony's to become the Parish of St. Elizabeth of Hungary. St. Stanislaus and St. Thomas churches in Adams will close and merge with Notre Dame to become the Parish of Pope John Paul the Great. North American Martyr in Lanesborough will close and its parishioners will attend churches in Dalton, Pittsfield or St. Mary's in Cheshire.

Bosley, who converted to catholicism for his marriage, said he didn't know if his plea would have an effect on plans that have been under discussion for at least two years. But he was concerned that the diocese leaders never contacted town and city officials to inform them of the closings.

"The church didn't consult with or give any heads up to any local officials," he wrote. "St. Francis is on a major corridor and is part of our skyline. St. Stan's is one of the most beautiful churches in Massachusetts and means so much to the town and especially the Polish population. We need to take this into account."

The diocese held several "listening sessions," first with clergy and parish officials, then with a group of laymen selected to represent each parish. Msgr. John J. Bonzagni, head of pastoral planning, also met with some 300 parishioners at St. Francis two years ago.

McDonnell said on Monday that he knew the closings would be painful but called on parishioners to come together to create new communities of worship. The buildings were full of memories, he said, but the focus of the church should be on people.

“As for the answer that it is the people and not the buildings, shame on them,” Bosley said in his e-mail. “The Catholic Church more than most should know the meaning of symbolism. These buildings are central to the community.”

The news release Bosley issued on Tuesday follows:

State Representative Daniel E. Bosley Calls For Moratorium and Dialogue on Parish Closings

This week, at a Monday morning press conference, the Diocese of Springfield announced the closing of several parishes and the consolidation of several others. This announcement comes on the heels of a letter from Springfield Bishop Timothy A. McDonnell that was read aloud at masses across the Diocese this past Sunday. This is a concern for many in the community as Church leaders have haphazardly planned the closing of these parishes without holding any formal meetings or contacting public officials.

In response to this announcement and amid public clamor, Rep. Daniel Bosley, D-North Adams, called for a public meeting to discuss the potential parish closings in the Springfield Diocese. “This announcement comes as a shock to many in the community. We need to establish a moratorium on church closings until the members of the respective parishes have had equal opportunity to weigh in on the matter,” said Bosley.

Church leaders have been short-sighted in closing local churches, where families have worshiped for generations, only to centralize under an arbitrary new name that ignores the connection that parishioners have had with their parish church and native Saint. To see St. Stanislaus on the list is a very big surprise to everyone. This is not only a church that has served its community well, but is one of the most beautiful churches in the state.

“A January 1, 2009, closing date is simply not a realistic timetable,” Bosley continued, “this heavy-handed top-down policy has not worked in other areas of the state and it will not work here. It seems strictly financially driven to announce the closing of one of the most beautiful and modern churches in the state. I wonder if this isn’t taking from Peter to pay Paul.”

There is not a true understanding of how certain parishes were chosen over other ones. Concerns exist on the closing and sale of parishes constructed on the backs of local working people. Bosley expressed concern that the nature of the community and its heritage as well as the history of these communities was not taken into account. One of the churches marked for closing is the focal point of a community while another sits on a major corridor to the North Berkshire Community.

According to Bosley, “if attendance is really the issue here, the whole community and other stakeholders should come together and decide which churches, schools and residences to close and which to keep. This decision should not simply be the summation of a tabulation at the bottom of an accountant’s ledger: we are talking about real people.”