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Home	News & Views	Arts & Leisure	Business	Sports	Editor
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NEWS & VIEWS

Court hears St. Brigid's could be stabilized permanently for \$324K
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It would cost just a third of a million dollars to make St. Brigid's Church structurally sound, a New York State Supreme Court judge was told last week.

The New York Archdiocese, which shuttered the Manhattan Famine-era building as unsafe in 2001 and began demolishing it last month, has contended that it would cost \$7 million to stabilize it, money it didn't have.

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But one of the city's most prominent structural and civil engineers, Richard Herschlag, explicitly rejected that figure in a detailed analysis done for St. Brigid's campaigners and noted that his \$324,000 estimate was "very similar" to the \$285,000 estimate given by a contracting firm in June 2003.

Judge Barbara Kapnick told a packed courtroom on Thursday that she would issue her decision after Labor Day. St. Brigid's campaigners, relieved at the extension of the temporary restraining order preventing demolition, labeled the outcome a "victory."

Earlier, their lawyer Harry Kresky said that some the paperwork surrounding the archdiocese's application for demolition was "clearly fraudulent." But the liveliest courtroom debate took place over the role of the five-

person Board of Trustees that was supposed to oversee the governance of the 1848 church. The Archdiocese's lead attorney John Callagy said that the Catholic church was hierarchical and thus wasn't under any obligation to consult parishioners, who were not legally "members" as might be the case in other denominations.

Kresky, backed up by a team of young lawyers, vigorously contested that view, saying that the Archdiocese had chosen to incorporate St. Brigid's Church in the 19th century. Citing the legal provisions governing such an arrangement, the attorney said it was clear that two trustees were on the board representing the parishioners. (The Archdiocese convened the board for the first time on July 18 and it approved demolition, though none of the parishioners involved with the Save St. Brigid's Committee knew of the meeting until afterward.)

When Callagy said that the Archdiocese shouldn't be left with a "rotting" building on its hands, Kresky mentioned the various "angel" offers to save St. Brigid's and also the Ancient Order of Hibernians proposal to turn it into a museum, which had been the subject of a story in the previous day's Daily News.

The attorney also introduced the engineer's report as evidence. In his letter to Mary Gleason, of the Save St. Brigid's Committee, Herschlag said "the stabilization of St. Brigid's is not only viable from an engineering standpoint, but from an economic standpoint as well."

Herschlag, who was the Manhattan borough president's chief engineer from 1991 until 1994, outlined the causes of the structural problem and a solution that would provide "adequate and permanent support for the east wall."

Outside the court, Ladies Ancient Order of Hibernians national board member Mary Hogan said: "Irish people all over the country have connections to that parish and they don't even realize it."

The people back in the late 1840s, she added, were "half starving," but in a matter of years, in the next generation, they built St. Patrick's Cathedral.

Hogan said that the church-going Irish "have great faith, still see themselves as staunch Catholics, but they question some of the business decisions that have been made."