Building demolitions opposed

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LAFAVETTE - Plans by the Catholic Church and Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital to demolish two more buildings at St. Mary's Orphanage here have been put on hold while possible alternatives are examined this week.

But before they reached agreement with preservationists to do that, the church and hospital, in a joint statement released Monday, insisted that the demolition of two more buildings is necessary to make room for expansion of the medical facility.

"The decision to raze some of the buildings appears necessary in spite of the historical or personal losses we or others may experience," the news release said.

On Saturday, the orphanage gymnasium was leveled, and demolition permits have been issued for destruction of the administration building, located between the two orphanage dormitories, and the chapel.

The buildings, constructed in the 1920s, have not been used for an orphanage for several years, although some of the buildings are now being used by the hospital. Preservationists believe the structures have architectural and historical value that should be preserved.

"We understand and appreciate the point of view of these individuals," said the press release from the hospital and church. "Although these buildings are not historical landmarks, they do, because of their age and architecture, reflect a small part of the history of Lafayette."

The hospital wants to construct several additions to Lourdes on the property, including a parking tower, radiology center, research lab and a medical office building, and the orphanage grounds are the only nearby land available for expansion, the news release said.

Jan Heymann, Lafayette City Council member, said she has received at least 75 calls since last Thursday from citizens opposing the demolition.

Heymann said the city administration and council cannot halt the work. But she said the city was able to organize a meeting with officials from Lourdes and the church and representatives of the preservationist group, resulting in the church and hospital agreeing to a temporary suspension of the demolition.

"I thought that was a great gesture on the part of Lourdes," she said.

In the meeting, church and hospital officials agreed that their architect, Pierce Meleton, will meet with Dale Meaux and Bob Bennett, architects on the preservationists' side, to determine if any possibility exists for keeping the orphanage buildings intact, Heymann said.

She said she understands Lourdes' plight because it has to compete with other hospitals in Lafayette, yet it needs more land to build new competitive facilities.

Heymann said the church has tried unsuccessfully for several years to sell the orphanage.

Phil Lank, a member of the preservationist group who also is director of Lafayette's Community Development Department, said the two dormitories probably would be torn down eventually if the chapel and administration building are razed.

Tearing down only the administration building and leaving the two dormitories on both sides would be "like pulling your front tooth," Lank said.

"We don't have many old buildings architecturally significant left in the city," Lank said.

He said the state historical preservation office tried to persuade the Diocese of Lafayette two years ago to place the orphanage on the National Register of Historic Places, but the idea was rejected by church officials.