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The Boston Globe

Supporters push to save fading Irish social club

By [Matt Rocheleau](#)

Globe Correspondent / May 11, 2011

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The annual Saint Patrick's Day dance was once a highlight of the calendar for the Irish Social Club of Boston. Members, who in past decades numbered in the thousands, would sway to the traditional music and toast friendships that spanned generations.

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But this year, so few of the 300 current members — mostly senior citizens — showed up that door collections did not cover the cost to hire the band.

That discouraging attendance, coupled with rapidly shrinking savings and a looming to-do list of repairs, sparked talks that led club officials to close the West Roxbury building last month after a final, bittersweet Sunday night dance.

Now, several elected officials and a team of residents, including some club members, are scrambling to save the 65-year-old organization and halt plans to sell the venue. After a sale, club officials intend to dissolve the nonprofit entirely.

While not a member himself, state Representative Edward Coppinger said that his parents were Sunday regulars for 30 years and that he has gone to the club often, recently with his own children. He believes the loss would rob the neighborhood of an iconic, beloved cultural institution.

"It's a place to celebrate your heritage," said Coppinger, whose district includes West Roxbury. "It's a nice warm environment. It was part of my parents' regular routine. They'd clean off the Sunday dinner plates and head down to the club."

Coppinger has been exploring ways to keep the Park Street club intact, including asking various state offices to look into whether the closure was carried out in accordance with regulations regarding a nonprofit selling assets and dissolving.

Meanwhile, some members drafted a grievance to file through an internal process based on the club's constitution and bylaws. Supporters also have launched a Facebook group and a website (www.irishsocialclub.org) to rally for their cause.

Club leaders said the decision to close was made by the aging 16-member board.

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"There's nothing to hide here," said Paul Kilgarriff, the club's lawyer and a longtime member. He believes the closure was carried out legitimately.

While appreciative of efforts to revive the club, he sees no scenario in which the building would open again. He expects the organization to dissolve once the building sells, though a sale might take months.

"The last thing we wanted to do was to close it down," said Kilgarriff, citing the club's worsening financial state, particularly the need to upgrade the fire-alarm system — a fix estimated at \$15,000, or half the club's remaining savings.

"If we stayed open, it would have closed within a matter of months anyway, but at that point it would be irresponsible," he said.

The club was founded in 1945 and originally met in rented space in Hibernian Hall in Roxbury. Thirty-three years later, the group purchased the West Roxbury building — a spacious former bowling alley.

Kilgarriff attributed the club's decline, in part, to a generational shift.

"The younger people really aren't interested in the kind of music played at the club and the type of dancing that goes on," he said. "On Saint Patrick's Day, they would rather go to an Irish bar in Boston. And that's fine, but they aren't coming to the Irish Social Club."

But others contend the club can be saved and believe not enough had been done in recent years to attract new members.

"There's a lot more support for this than I think the directors realized," said City Councilor Matt O'Malley, who represents the neighborhood and is working with Coppinger to save the club. "I think that there is perhaps an opportunity to relaunch the Social Club 2.0. . . I think there's an opportunity for the club to thrive once again."

Officials and community members have proposed launching a fund-raising campaign and membership drives, replacing the fire alarms at reduced cost through donated labor, and adding programs to attract younger members.

Kathleen Adams, a 15-year member whose mother is also a member and whose father is a former president of the club, said that between current members and outside supporters, there are enough interested and motivated people to keep the club going.

"I understand if [the club's leadership] doesn't want to run it anymore," Adams said. "I just don't understand why they would want to close it when there are so many people around who want to keep it open."

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at mjrochele@gmail.com. ■

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