

New efforts to save Melkonian forest, old buildings

Preservation order has been improved by Cyprus government

The Cyprus government's Town Planning Department is expected to issue a new preservation order declaring a large part of the Melkonian School's estate in Nicosia as a national heritage site once again.

This has revived hopes within the Armenian community of Cyprus that the high school and its boarding house could some day reopen to its former glory, after these hopes were dashed when the previous order was overturned by a Supreme Court decision in December.

News reports said that a revised preservation order will be put to Interior Minister Neoclis Sylikiotis for approval within the next two weeks in order to protect the two main historic buildings and the forest planted by Genocide orphans along Limassol Avenue.

This move will effectively put an end to efforts by the administrators of the estate, the AGBU, to develop the land commercially, something that could only have been achieved after the previous preservation order was overturned.

According to press reports, the new preservation order has overcome some legal obstacles that previously allowed the court to overturn the decision.

"We cannot allow a national treasure to be sold as easily as the school was closed," said Vartkes Mahdessian, the Armenian Representative in parliament who spearheaded a community campaign last month to save the school from development.

"The community wants to see the school reopen some day and we are all united in our effort," he said, adding that "it is unheard of in this day and age of growing demand for quality schools, that such an establishment was not regarded as economically viable."

Mahdessian, the community's Archbishop and community and political groups representing the majority of Armenians in Cyprus, wrote to the president of the Supreme Court, the Attorney General, the Minister of Interior and political party leaders calling for the state to intervene and save the school property from being sold and destroyed. They also

demanded explanations as to why the defense for the previous preservation order failed in court.

Members of the community feared rumors of potential bidders showing interested to buy the 125,000 sq.m. property at a fraction of the current market value of CYP 75 mln (US\$ 158 mln).

“At a time when the Melkonian would have provided shelter and education opportunities to large numbers of Armenian students fleeing the troubles in neighboring Lebanon and Iraq as it has done in the past, the school is now closed and the administrators can’t care less about preserving Armenian education and culture, nor about the fate of the Armenian Diaspora,” said Alumni spokesman Masis Der Partogh.

“We want the new preservation order to be issued as soon as possible as we are aware of plans for sporting and other commercial projects on the school’s grounds,” he said.

“Such plans will only benefit the pockets of a greedy few,” he added.

The community also fears that the AGBU will try to give small pockets of the land to the government in order to secure state support for commercial development of the rest of the property.

“If the Cyprus government or public institutions accept such offers they would be regarded as accomplices to this national crime,” Der Partogh said.