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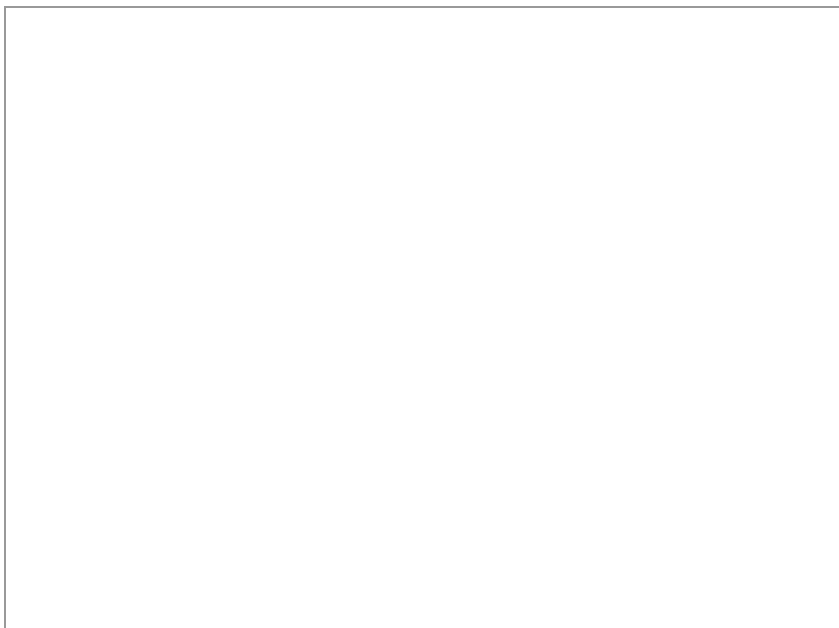
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ALLSTON BRIGHTON

After 6-year effort, community puts Presentation School in Oak Square center back on track

Posted by Matt Rocheleau March 3, 2011 09:00 AM

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(Jonathan Wiggs/Globe file)

Photo from fall 2007 ceremony for the Archdiocese's sale of the Presentation School building to a grassroots foundation that now -- after several additional years of obstacles -- hopes to open the space as a community center in September. Harry Hong, 6, took in the scene that included Mayor Thomas Menino (podium) and Cardinal Sean O'Malley (right).

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Preserving a vital anchor in Oak Square has meant a patient and hard-fought effort by the very same group it will serve: the community.

After a six-year, on-again, off-again private-public endeavor, the Presentation School Foundation (PSF) has broken ground on a \$3.8-million renovation of a former Brighton parochial school that will be converted into a multi-service community center.

The ceremony, grassroots organizers hope, signified the end of a series of lengthy legal, fund-raising and construction battles that have either stalled or nearly ended an altogether \$6.6-million undertaking to restore the former Our Lady of the Presentation K-6 school building closed by the Boston Catholic Archdiocese in 2005.

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When the 83-year-old facility on Washington Street reopens – expected in September – organizers say its 28,000 square feet will be “an anchor for the neighborhood.”



(Courtesy: Jennifer Spencer)

Mayor Menino at last week's groundbreaking.

“The passion and perseverance of PSF volunteers made this day possible,” PSF Board President Jim Prince said in a release from the Feb. 24 ground breaking. “Their determination and vision attracted the support,” of outside groups who helped turn the idea into reality.

The center will be “green,” LEED-certified and offer affordable daycare and preschool, community health services, educational enrichment programs, adult education including English for speakers of other languages and meeting space for local civic groups. Those services will be run through partnerships with Little Sprouts preschool, WGBH, Wheelock College and St. Elizabeth’s Medical Center.

The building was purchased in 2007 by PSF after public outcry and protests it led had failed to sway Archdiocese officials from closing the school two years prior. The school’s closure included an abrupt and parent-infuriating lock out just before that academic year’s end forcing graduation ceremonies for students as young as three to be held on a small grassy common at the nearby rotary's center.

But the Archdiocese eventually agreed to sell the building to PSF. Church officials cut the asking price in half, from \$2 million to \$1 million. That good-faith act came in the wake of the clergy sex abuse scandal abuse scandal news, and was seen by organizers as a way to for the Archdiocese to support the PSF’s vision and “heal” strained community relations.

“Efforts since then to raise money for renovation, enlist the support of civic groups, business leaders, and foundations, and define, as a community, what the PSF Community Center should be,” said a release from PSF.

Early last summer a, \$750,000 funding gap left the PSF “close to organizational death” and the group “nearly had to sell the building,” foundation spokesman Kevin M. Carragee said in a phone interview. But, within three weeks necessary funding was raised through an outpouring of public and private support.

Then, in the latest setback, renovation that was set to begin late last summer and have the facility in-use two months ago was delayed when organizers learned that they had to alter plans to preserve both the roof’s and window’s historic character, according to a November letter from Prince.

The changes were made, but also increased costs, which required more time to secure added funding.

“We’ve had multiple moments over the past six years when our success was in

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severe doubt," Carragee said, adding that the foundation is an all-volunteer body – save a lone, “tireless, overworked” communications employee.

A similarly “impressive sign of commitment,” has been donations from many middle-class Allston and Brighton residents who gave both money and time to a guarantee-less, lengthy cause that has been supported primarily on hope – and at times seemed more destined to fall short than persist, he said.

“This is an incredible accomplishment for the Presentation School Foundation,” Mayor Thomas M. Menino said in the release. “The new community center will create jobs and contribute to the stability of the Allston-Brighton neighborhood. I am glad that the City of Boston was able to contribute to this wonderful foundation.”

Secretary of State William Galvin, Sen. Steven Tolman speaking on Rep. Kevin Honan's behalf, Rep. Michael Moran and City Councilor Mark Ciommo also attended the recent groundbreaking for the building surrounding a busy Brighton business and transit hub near an old-but-upgrading firehouse, a vulnerable-but-alive-for-now library and across from an expansive, decade-old YMCA.

Financial contributions for the project include: \$400,000 from the city, \$1 million in historic tax credits from the state and \$550,000 from the New Balance Foundation. Fourteen other foundations along with \$300,000 from local residents and small businesses have also aided the undertaking.

Wainwright Bank, MassDevelopment, and the Property and Casualty Initiative helped finance the project. Boston Community Capital financed the building's 2007 purchase by PSF.

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