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ALLSTON BRIGHTON

## Oak Square poised to celebrate revival of Presentation School as community center

Posted by Matt Rocheleau December 21, 2011 03:51 PM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Brighton residents and neighborhood leaders are poised to celebrate the final chapter of a seven-and-a-half-year grassroots effort to save and reopen a pillar of the Oak Square community.

For the first time since 2005, children are learning and playing inside the Presentation School building, where a preschool and daycare program recently opened.

In the final stages of its multi-million dollar conversion from a parochial school to a multi-service community center, the 84-year-old, 28,000-square-foot facility is expected to host a grand opening early next year.

Officials leading the rehabilitation say the ceremony will thank the community for the hundreds of hours of volunteer work and the hundreds of thousands of dollars residents and small business pulled from their own pockets to invest in the public-private endeavor.

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the public-private endeavor.

“We’re happy to have it open and have kids back in there,” said resident Noah Feldman, who was appointed last month as interim executive director of the grassroots [Presentation School Foundation](#), which led the fight to save the building and now owns it.

“Our goal with the building is to continue to have the entire community involved in the workings of it,” added Feldman, who previously served on the foundation’s board for two years.

The success in reviving the building followed years of uncertainty for the site.

In spring 2004, the Boston Catholic Archdiocese announced plans to close dozens of its schools and churches, including the Our Lady of the Presentation K-6 school, flanked by Washington and Tremont streets, sparking a public outcry and protests from Brighton residents.

One year later, the building in Oak Square shut its doors. The school’s closure included an abrupt lock out just before the end of the academic year, forcing [some of that year’s graduation ceremonies](#) for students to be held on a small grassy common in the center of an adjacent rotary.

But two years later, the [archdiocese agreed to sell](#) the building to the then newly-established Presentation School Foundation. 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](#), and was seen by organizers as a way to for the archdiocese to help heal strained community relations by supporting the neighborhood’s vision.

The foundation had formed as a nonprofit in the month following the announcement that the school would close. Since then, the foundation has led the effort, including the site’s ongoing renovations, to re-establish the space as a community anchor.

To purchase and restore the Presentation School building, the foundation has spent \$6.7 million, a figure that includes the renovation’s \$4.4-million price tag.

But the foundation’s success in revitalizing the neighborhood’s vision

But the foundation has spent little on its own operations over the past seven-plus years. For about four years, the organization ran on volunteer. Then for three years, it staffed one paid employee, and, for six months, the nonprofit surged with a record-size staff of two.

Relying on devoted unpaid help, the organization has withstood a series of lengthy legal, fund-raising, and construction battles.

“We’ve had multiple moments over the past six years when our success was in severe doubt,” spokesman Kevin M. Carragee has said.

In summer 2010, a \$750,000 funding gap left the foundation “close to organizational death” and the group “nearly had to sell the building,” he said. But within three weeks, through an outpouring of public and private support, the group raised the necessary funding.

Then, a few months later as renovations were set to begin, the project hit another snag when organizers learned they would have to alter plans and come up with more funding in order to preserve the original architectural design and historic character of the red-tile roof and period-arched windows of the Spanish Colonial Revival-style building.

Built in 1929, the structure features Flemish bond brick facades and a front gabled, ornamented portico supported by Corinthian columns.

“The building was built during a unique time for the Catholic Church in Boston as the church first started to see economic success in the area,” said Brighton resident and Massachusetts Secretary of State William F. Galvin, who chairs the state’s historical commission, which aided the building’s renovations with \$1.25 million in historic tax credits.

“You just don’t see schools built with these features,” Galvin said. “It’s an opulent school building, and this is an excellent example of a historic renovation using tax credits in an urban setting.

“Not only is it an important to save this magnificent piece of architecture, but it is also important to save this building as a community space,” he added.

Replacement materials for the building’s roof and windows were carefully chosen to match the original look. An elevator tower was installed and the

character-defining entranceways were made universally accessible, while maintaining sensitivity to the building's past.

New heating, cooling, communication and electrical systems were installed. The center's façade was repainted, the [site's landscaping enhanced](#), and the building's barrel-vaulted corridors, interior woodwork, and limestone trim were restored.

"It's important to keep the neighborhood intact and these buildings preserved and their beauty protected," Galvin said. "This unique building will have a whole new life."

A [ground-breaking was held last February](#) and officials had announced then they expected to open the facility in September.

But, the discovery of a moisture problem took added time to fix and added about \$350,000 in project costs. In a tough fund-raising environment, securing the extra money needed to pay for unforeseen expenses has also accounted for the delay of the building's official unveiling.

But on a major milestone was reached when the 26-room community center's first occupant Little Sprouts, through a partnership with WGBH and Wheelock College, opened a preschool and daycare inside the building mid-November.

A second tenant, St. Elizabeth's Medical Center, is expected to move its longstanding Women, Infants and Children program into the Presentation School building by late January or early February.

The foundation is actively searching for more nonprofit partners to fill 5,000 square feet of space left to be leased in the community center that will be "green," LEED-certified and will also offer meeting space for local civic groups.

The building sits in near a busy Brighton business and transit hub that is surrounded by an [old-but-recently-upgraded firehouse](#), a [vulnerable-but-alive-for-now](#) library and across from an expansive, decade-old YMCA.

Financial contributions for the project included \$500,000 from the city and \$550,000 from the New Balance Foundation. Fourteen other foundations, along with more than \$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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