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Residents oppose plan to raze 98-year-old Home for Little Wanderers building in JP

Posted by Matt Rocheleau April 12, 2012 03:02 PM

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(Boston Redevelopment Authority)

Housing developers have proposed razing all three buildings on the Home for Little Wanderers' site along S. Huntington Avenue in Jamaica Plain, including the above facility that was built in 1914.

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

More than a dozen residents urged a local developer to halt plans to demolish a 98-year-old building at the center of The Home for Little Wanderers campus along South Huntington Avenue.

Nearly all of the residents who spoke at a public meeting Wednesday said that the developer, Boston Residential Group, should find some other way to incorporate the 1914 building into the developer's proposal to construct rental housing on the 3.5-acre site that slopes down to the Jamaica way.

Because it is more than 50 years old, demolition of the circa 1914 building requires a 90-day delay period and review by the city's landmarks commission, which has scheduled a public hearing about the proposed demolition for May 8.

(To see historic photos of the Knight Children's Center, [click here](#).)

Residents also voiced concern Wednesday that, in addition to the project that calls for 196 apartment units at 161 S. Huntington Ave., another developer recently sent a letter to the city saying that it [intends to file detailed plans](#) sometime in May to build 195 apartments with ground-floor retail about 300 feet away at 105A S. Huntington Ave.

Boston Residential Group has led projects to restore and reuse other old, local buildings for high-end housing – including the former Tower records building at 360 Newbury St. and the former Red Cross building at 285 Columbus Ave., each originally built in the 1920s.

And, company officials said they have explored several options to restore some or all aspects of the three-story 1914 building, which, not including an addition built in the 1950s, is the oldest of three buildings at the site by nearly a quarter century. But, the developer's CEO Curtis Kemeny said that, so far, none of the preservation ideas are financially viable for the company.

"It's physically and economically infeasible to use for this purpose [housing]," he told a crowd of about 75 at Wednesday's public meeting at the MSPCA Angell Animal Medical Center.

The developer [has proposed](#) razing all three existing buildings and replacing

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The developer has proposed razing all three existing buildings and replacing them with a four-to-five-story, 190,000 square-foot building. It would house a projected 159 studios and one-bedroom units, 37 two-bedroom units, parking reserved for tenants including 154 spots underneath the development and 16 spots above ground.

There would be 26 affordable units, meeting city requirements for at least 13 percent affordable housing for new projects. The other, market-rate apartments would range in size from about 550 square feet for studios to 1,150 square feet for two-bedroom units and in price from about \$1,900 to \$2,000 per month for studios to about \$2,500 to \$4,000 per month for two-bedroom units.

The building would also feature a common areas including: a fitness center, dining room, a lounge, pool, patio and access to the nearby Emerald Necklace park system.

The development would remove 53 trees and replace them with 73 new ones.

The developer hopes receive zoning approval by the coming fall and begin an estimated 18-month construction process in early 2013.

Nearly everyone who spoke out at the public meeting – which served the dual purpose of a community meeting about demolition delay and about the city’s large project review process – opposed the idea of knocking down the site’s 98-year-old institutional building.

Michael Reiskind, who is on the project’s impact advisory group, a member of several local civic associations and a neighborhood historian, strongly urged the developers not to tear down the 1914 building.

“I think it can be incorporated into this project,” he said Wednesday. “There are other institutions – nonprofits – that have successfully done this. I don’t think they’re as rich as you ... If they can do this, I think you can.”

A representative from the Boston Preservation Alliance, which has publicly opposed the demolition, asked that the developers consider at least one more alternative scenario – which would call for building new apartment space on either side of 1914 building.

Project architect Larry Grossman of ADD Inc. said that idea – a modification of

one of four development scenarios the developer has considered so far – is still being explored.

Some residents questioned why so many units were needed and suggested that if the developer cannot build a project that can incorporate the 1914 building and also be profitable, then perhaps they should look elsewhere.

But, Kemeny said that the developers, through a signed agreement with the Home for the Little Wanderers in exchange for the property have given a “significant sum” of money to the nonprofit to help the agency develop new space to relocate.

“The size of what we’re proposing here supports the cost of the land,” he said, adding that while it is true that any project his company would build would need to meet certain profit margin standards. “The people that are also benefitting from what’s coming here are the kids [at Home for the Little Wanderers].”

The 213-year-old agency [announced last summer](#) it planned to relocate some programming and services from its oldest and most-well known facility, the 1914 building at the Knight Children’s Center, to its 166-acre Walpole site. The Walpole site is undergoing \$19-million in new construction.

The Jamaica Plain campus comprises 55,000-square feet across three buildings that have been used for a year-round residential and day school treatment program for youth ages 5 to 13 with a range of emotional, behavioral, educational and psychiatric needs.

A few residents also asked the developers to consider raising the amount of affordable housing closer to the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Council’s recommendation of 25 percent. After being asked by a council member Wednesday night, Kemeny said he would meet with the neighborhood group to discuss the matter.

In an interview after the meeting Kemeny said he was “very happy to have the feedback tonight.”

“We’ll go back and consider all of the information we received,” he said.

There was also significant concern from residents about the other housing

development being eyed for a vacant, wooded 1.1-acre lot at 105A S. Huntington Avenue. Residents said they wanted to know more about both projects before going through a process to approve one or the other.

Boston Redevelopment Authority project manager John Fitzgerald said the city agency he works for is “well aware of both projects.” But, the other developer, Cedar Valley Development, LLC has only submitted a letter of intent filing and has not submitted a more-detailed project notification form.

Boston Residential Group submitted its letter of intent on Jan. 18 and submitted its [project notification form](#) – which formally kicked off the city’s Article 80 large project public review process – on March 27.

The 30-day comment period, required under Article 80, for that project has been extended to May 16, about one week after the landmark commission’s scheduled public hearing on demolition delay. Officials from the commission were not immediately available to comment Thursday.

Cedar Valley Development, LLC, submitted its [letter of intent](#) for 105A S. Huntington Ave. on April 2. The letter said the developer expects to file a project notification form in May.

The development entity formed on March 6, state records show. The group is led by Anthony M. Nader, who also presides over Star Realty Group at 895 Huntington Avenue, which Cedar Valley Development lists as its address.

Nader was not immediately available for comment Thursday. Matthew Kiefer, a lawyer representing the developer, declined to disclose more details about the 105A S. Huntington Ave. proposal because the “project parameters [including the building’s size, number of units, parking, etc.] are not yet defined.”

“We look forward to the public process, but it would be premature to comment at this time,” he said.

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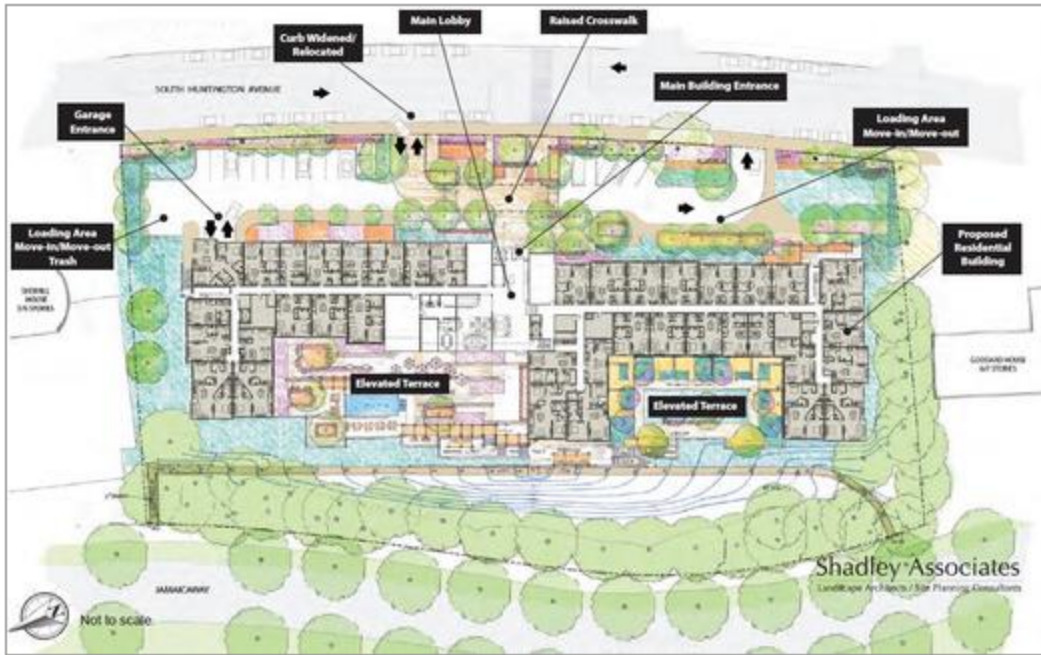
(Boston Redevelopment Authority)

A rendering looking from S. Huntington Avenue at the proposed 196-unit apartment building.



(Boston Redevelopment Authority)

A rendering looking from the Jamaicaaway area at the proposed 196-unit apartment building.



(Boston Redevelopment Authority)

An overhead rendering of the proposed 196-unit apartment building at 161 S. Huntington Ave.

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