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Emmanuel College moves to buy St. Margaret's convent site in Roxbury to use as retreat center

Posted by Matt Rocheleau April 23, 2012 12:27 PM

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The Society of St. Margaret, an Episcopal order of nuns who have lived in Roxbury's Fort Hill section since 1992.

Update: Emmanuel College has filed with the city an amendment to its institutional master plan regarding this proposal. The Boston Redevelopment Authority has scheduled a meeting about the proposal for May 22, from 6 to 7 p.m. in the second-floor community room at the Boston Police District B-2 station in Dudley Square.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Emmanuel College is moving to buy the Society of St. Margaret convent property in Roxbury in order to use the site as a spiritual and community service retreat center.

The school says in [a statement on its website](#): "In the spirit of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, who founded Emmanuel College, and who have served Roxbury since 1854, the college will include programs for retreats, reflection and prayer, spiritual direction, social justice, and service learning as well as some offices to support these programs on the site."

The college's online statement, which is also posted to the [convent's website](#), says the school would invite local community members to participate in offerings at the retreat center that would be managed by the college's campus ministry office. The site is about two miles from Emmanuel's Fenway-area campus. School officials could not immediately be reached Monday for comment.

St. Margaret's has been trying for more than one year to sell its four-building, 38,500-square-foot convent.

The order of Episcopal nuns [plans to move](#) its operations out of Boston to a retreat center in Duxbury that it has owned for more than a century and expects will be more sustainable.

The convent atop Fort Hill in Roxbury has become too expensive, the nuns have said. Selling the property will allow the society to devote more resources toward the mission they have run in Haiti since 1927.

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An attempt to sell the convent to a new public charter school [fell through last spring](#). After neighbors petitioned against the sale, the Bridge Boston Charter School terminated a tentative, \$3.3-million agreement to buy the 1.65-acre property and instead opened last September in temporary space in Jamaica Plain.

Had that deal gone through, the convent space would have needed little renovation; the pre-kindergarten through eighth grade school would have eventually enrolled about 330 students. But, neighbors worried about parking and traffic problems from cars and buses dropping off and picking up the schoolchildren. The hilltop property is surrounded by a quiet residential neighborhood and some small, narrow streets.

Some local residents also said they were caught off guard by proposal.

Last February, the nuns announced their intention to sell the campus, where the society's roots date back to the late 19th century when it established a nursing home for poor African-American women. Two decades ago, the nuns converted the Roxbury nursing home into a convent when they sold the four Beacon Hill brownstones they had lived in for more than 100 years.

At the order's Duxbury property, construction on a new residence for the nuns broke ground in September.

St. Margaret's was established in 1855 as a nursing order in England. The society came to Boston in the early 1870s. There are nearly 30 sisters, who take vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. Some are stationed in Massachusetts, New York and Haiti. The majority of the nuns live at the Fort Hill convent.

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