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City delays demolition of Home for Little Wanderers building in Jamaica Plain

Posted by Matt Rocheleau May 9, 2012 04:21 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

A 98-year-old Jamaica Plain building that developers hope to demolish and replace with housing cannot be torn down during the next three months, according to a city ruling made at a hearing Tuesday night.

That 90-day delay can be waived if developers are able to – at another hearing – convince officials from the Boston Landmarks Commission that there is no feasible alternative to demolition.

If not, developer Boston Residential Group will have to wait until Aug. 7 to obtain city permits to demolish the Knight Children's Center.

Built in 1914, the building sits at the center of The Home for Little Wanderers campus along South Huntington Avenue. Not including an addition built in the 1950s, it is the oldest of three buildings at the site by nearly a quarter century.

The building does not have landmark status or any other public protection. By city rule, because it is more than 50 years old, the structure was automatically given a hearing, held in City Hall Tuesday evening, to determine whether to implement a 90-day demolition delay.

The landmarks department approved that measure, city officials said. City officials said that, as of Wednesday afternoon, no petition has been filed to attempt to designate the building as a city landmark, which involves an entirely separate process from the Article 85 demolition delay process.

At an Article 85 [meeting in mid-April](#), more than a dozen residents -- nearly everyone who spoke – urged the Boston Residential Group to find some other way to incorporate the 1914 building into the developer's proposal to construct rental housing on the 3.5-acre site.

(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.

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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 previously they have explored several options to restore some or all aspects of the three-story, 1914 building. But Boston Residential Group CEO Curtis Kemeny said that 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 a public hearing last month.

The developers said then that they hope to receive zoning approval by the coming fall and begin an estimated 18-month construction process in early 2013.

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.

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 Home for Little Wanderers, a 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.

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