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JAMAICA PLAIN

## Some oppose plans for higher mix of market-rate housing at Blessed Sacrament campus in Jamaica Plain

Posted by Matt Rocheleau August 2, 2012 05:41 PM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Some are criticizing development proposals that would build a higher mix of market-rate housing – and thus a lower proportion of affordable units – than originally planned at the campus of the former Blessed Sacrament church in the Hyde Square section of Jamaica Plain.

Over the past six years, 81 housing units have been built on the three-acre site. The Archdiocese of Boston closed the church in 2004 and sold the property a year later to the nonprofit Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation and its partner New Atlantic Development.

All of the units constructed so far are designated as affordable housing and follow the original plan the community worked extensively on and agreed to in 2006 before the redevelopment broke ground.

But a new proposal calls for market-rate rental housing to be built in a 116-year-old former school building, which differs from the original agreement with

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year-old former school building, which differs from the original agreement with the community that planned to use the building as a school or for community use.

Another proposal for market-rate condominium units to be built inside the campus' 98-year-old church building – a city-designated landmark – has also drawn criticism recently, even though the plan largely follows the community's original plan and calls for a slightly higher proportion of affordable units and a slightly larger community space.

The original plan called for the ratio of affordable housing across the entire Blessed Sacrament campus to be about 72 percent, exceeding the community's request for at least 50 percent affordable housing.

If both of the current development proposals are completed as planned, the ratio would be about 65 percent.

GLC Development Resources is under agreement to purchase the Norbert School building from its co-owners, the JPNDC and New Atlantic, according to Matthew Kiefer, a Boston attorney.

Kiefer and his wife are partners with GLC Development in a proposal to build between 18 and 19 "small, loft-style" market-rate rental units inside the two-and-a-half story, 15,000 square-foot building. He said no timetable for construction has been determined and that it's too early in the process to comment on potential lease pricing for the units.

"They will not be luxury units by any means," he said.

The facility at the corner of Sunnyside and Westerly streets used to house the COMPASS School, a private school serving students with special needs. The community plan envisioned the school staying there, but it moved out in 2009.

At the former Cheverus School, a similarly-sized building on the church campus, the landlords were able to find a community tenant, the nonprofit Hyde Square Task Force, to buy the space.

The property's owners tried to find another school to move into the Norbert, but were told it was too small, JPNDC spokeswoman Sally Swenson said. Dozens of other proposals were received, but no other community uses, including ideas for

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artist studios and office space, were feasible.

“They didn’t use any of their creativity,” resident Kenneth Tangvik, who works at and is a founding member of the Hyde Square Task Force, said during a meeting of the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Council Tuesday night. “They didn’t bring in the community.”

He told the crowd, including JPNDC director Richard Thal, he plans to organize opposition, including petitions against the recently proposed developments for the site.

“It’s not going to go quietly,” he said.

Controversy has also been raised over a proposal to redevelop the church building.

New Atlantic Development is under agreement with the JPNDC to take over sole possession of the structure that towers over Centre Street.

The company is proposing to spend \$14 million to build between 32 and 34 market-rate condominium units across about 45,000 square feet along with about 2,000 square feet of space reserved for community use, which the JPNDC will manage, according to New Atlantic president and founder Peter Roth.

Both Roth and Thal said the JPNDC hopes to secure funding to purchase four of the units back from New Atlantic and to then sell those units at affordable rates.

The original plan for the project called for 37 condos, four of which would be affordable and the rest sold at market rate. Thal said the Archdiocese sold the church with a restriction that the building be used as housing, with the exception of the front portion of the first floor that is designated as community space.

Roth said he hopes the project will start in November and be completed by next October.

The condos are projected to be priced in the low- to mid-\$400,000 range. A couple of larger penthouse units may be built and could be priced as high as

\$775,000 each, Roth said.

He said the “pricing is right on the achieved per square foot sales of newly constructed and ‘top-of-market’ condos in JP.”

The units would range from studios that are about 500 square feet to possible penthouses that would be 1,830 square feet, he said. The average projected size is about 1,040 square feet.

Tangvik said he also opposes the proposal for the church.

“Thirty-two luxury condos will not fit in with the Latin Quarter vision for this area,” he said at the council meeting this week.

Thal said that the church was shown to dozens of other interested parties that hoped to use the building as a school, senior housing, affordable housing, commercial space and even to restore its church use. None proved viable.

He said the JPNDC and New Atlantic pay to maintain the vacant church and school at a cost of about \$10,000 per month for each building. He said that money could be used to support other efforts his nonprofit runs, including ongoing affordable housing projects elsewhere and economic development programming.

Roth said that the church project has been planned to be market-rate condos because “the project itself cannot afford to sell for less.”

And, Thal and Roth each contended that the project to redevelop the church largely sticks to the original plan. Because the total number of units will be a few less but the number of affordable units would remain constant, the project would slightly increase that building’s ratio of affordable housing.

“We’re still committed to what was the original plan,” Thal said.

“The only real change is an improved design that should be more efficient to construct,” Roth said. “The earlier plan achieved more units, but at the expense of the quality of the space.”

But neighborhood council member Martha Rodriguez was among those who said a lot has changed in the six years since the plan was originally agreed to

and asked developers to listen to concerns being expressed now by those who want the original plan to be reopened for discussion.

"This community has taken a lot of hits," including worry that the neighborhood has and is continuing to undergo gentrification, said Rodriguez, who also serves on the JPNDC board.

Thal told the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Council that the JPNDC is considering hosting a meeting about the development proposals sometime in September.

"It has been very difficult, and we appreciate everyone's feelings about it," Swenson said. "The market rates coming at the end of the development process kind of underlines the pain people are feeling about it."

Roth said said the current outlook of creating a site-wide total of 65 percent affordable housing "is a fantastic outcome."

"There are very few sites in the city that achieve that," he said.

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