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JAMAICA PLAIN

Some in JP irked by lack of community input in latest Blessed Sacrament campus plans

Posted by Matt Rocheleau September 20, 2012 02:51 PM

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By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Some Jamaica Plain residents voiced frustration Wednesday night that the co-developers of the Blessed Sacrament Church campus did not consult with the community sooner to work on the latest proposals for the site's two remaining undeveloped buildings.

Those proposals, publicized first by the Jamaica Plain Gazette, have drawn controversy because they would alter some aspects of a master plan for the campus, which was approved six years ago after an extensive community process through the city's redevelopment authority.

Among the changes would be a decrease in the ratio of the site's affordable housing.

For the first time since 2006, a community advisory committee appointed by the city to oversee the campus' redevelopment was reconvened. The Boston Redevelopment Authority hosted the meeting Wednesday evening at the Julia

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Redevelopment Authority hosted the meeting Wednesday evening at the Anna Martin House.

“The community process up until now hasn’t been good enough and we apologize,” said Maddie Ribble, a board member for the nonprofit Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation, which is developing the campus through a partnership with New Atlantic Development.

“We’re hoping tonight is the start of doing this a little differently,” Ribble added.

The Archdiocese of Boston closed the church in 2004 and sold the property a year later to the two co-developers. One year after that, the master redevelopment plan was approved.

Since then, 81 housing units have been built on the three-acre site along Centre Street in Hyde Square. All of the units constructed so far are designated as affordable housing and follow the original plan.

But one new proposal calls developer GLC Development Resources and other private partners to build 21 market-rate rental units inside the 116-year-old Norbert School building. The original plan called for the facility to continue to house the COMPASS School, a private school serving students with special needs, but it moved out in 2009.

Another proposal calls for New Atlantic to take over sole possession of the campus’ 98-year-old church by relieving the JPNDC of an estimated \$1.5 million in debt it owes on the building. Starting as soon as November, New Atlantic would spend about \$14 million to build between 32 and 34 market-rate condominiums inside the city-designated landmark. The JPNDC hopes to buy back four of the units to resell them as affordable housing.

That proposal has also drawn controversy. However, it largely follows the community’s original plan and would actually create a slightly higher proportion of affordable units and also calls for about 200 more square feet of community space.

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.

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The original plan called for the entire Blessed Sacrament campus to contain 118 housing units, 88 of which, or about 74 percent, would be designated as affordable.

If both of the current development proposals are completed as planned, the campus would contain between 134 and 136 total units, 85 of which, or about 63 percent, would be designated as affordable.

Some community members on Wednesday called for the co-developers to consider new proposals with either more affordable housing or more community use. Some residents said they were concerned that the proposed reduction of the campus' affordable housing ratio would impact the surrounding neighborhood.

"We cannot let that kind of money come into the community and kill the diversity," said Egleston Square resident Oren Elow, 68. "Before you know it, it will be richer than the South End."

Lease price estimates for the rental units proposed for the Norbert School have not been disclosed. But, the condos inside the church are projected to be at about \$390,000 each on average. A couple of larger penthouse units may be built and could be priced as high as \$775,000 each, the developer has said.

Officials from the co-developers said they have entertained more than 50 ideas to repurpose the two undeveloped buildings, but the only two proposals that have proved feasible in the still-slow economy are the two being worked on presently.

The developers have said they pay to maintain the vacant church and school at a cost of about \$10,000 per month for each building.

"We've named this area the Latin Quarter – with all these condos coming in, this won't be the Latin Quarter anymore," said Anny Sanchez, a coordinator for the nonprofit Hyde Square Task Force, which runs some youth programming from a school building it purchased on the church campus. "It's a shame. Everyone's going to be gone."

Some at the meeting said they feel betrayed to have been left out of the conversation until now, including Betsaida Gutierrez, a community activist and former Blessed Sacrament parishioner who has an affordable housing building

on the church campus named after her.

“It is very sad that we never knew and were never involved,” she said. “I feel ignored.”

“Please allow us to come back to the table with you,” Gutierrez said. “Please don’t leave us out because we are the heart of the Blessed Sacrament campus.”

Neither of the proposals have been formally filed with the city.

Redevelopment authority spokeswoman Melina Schuler has said that because the Norbert School proposal calls for a different use than previously approved, the plans would need to go through the city’s Article 80 large project public review process again to seek approval.

But, the church building proposal is subject only to a less-extensive design review, and not a full Article 80 public review process, because the approved use for housing to be built inside the church would not change, according to Schuler.

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