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City meeting set on proposal for housing in Norbert School building at Blessed Sacrament campus in JP

Posted by Matt Rocheleau October 22, 2012 04:13 PM

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(Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation)

A sketch made in 2006 of the original master plan for redevelopment the Blessed Sacrament campus in the Hyde Square section of Jamaica Plain.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

The city's redevelopment authority will host a meeting next week about a controversial proposal to build market-rate apartments in a vacant school building on the former Blessed Sacrament church campus in Jamaica Plain.

A meeting has been scheduled to discuss a proposal to convert the Norbert School building into 21 loft-style studio and one-bedroom apartments, according to the [Boston Redevelopment Authority's website](#). The meeting is set for Thursday, Nov. 1 from 6 to 8 p.m. in the James W. Hennigan School cafeteria on Heath Street.

An [outline of the proposal](#) was filed with the city last week. The proposal is one of two plans being considered for the church campus' two remaining

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undeveloped buildings.

Both proposals [have drawn criticism](#) because they would each 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.

Some residents [have also voiced frustration](#) that the campus' co-developers had not consulted with the community sooner about the proposals.

The co-developers, the nonprofit Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation and the private company New Atlantic Development, apologized for their lack of communication about the proposals last month during a meeting, which, for the first time since 2006, reconvened a community advisory committee appointed by the city to oversee the campus' redevelopment.

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. [Those completed projects](#) have cost a combined \$27.3 million, \$22.4 million of which was funded through a mix of federal state and city subsidies.

All of the units constructed so far follow the original plan and are designated as affordable housing. Forty of the units are reserved for residents making less than 30 percent of the area's median income, 24 are reserved for residents making less than 60 percent and the other 17 are reserved for those who make less than 80 percent of the area's median income.

But the Norbert School building proposal calls for developer GLC Development Resources and other private partners to build 21 market-rate rental units inside the 116-year-old building.

The original plan called for the three-story, 14,865-square-foot facility to

continue to house the COMPASS School, a private school serving students with special needs. But, it moved out in 2009 and the building has been empty since.

The other controversial proposal, which has not filed for city approval, 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.

New Atlantic would spend about \$14 million to build between 32 and 34 market-rate condominiums inside the city-designated landmark, company officials have said. The JPNDC hopes to buy back four of the units to resell them as affordable housing.

The church building proposal has drawn controversy even though it largely follows the community's original plan, 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.

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 have called for the co-developers to consider new proposals with either more affordable housing or more community use.

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 have already paid about \$2.1 million to maintain the vacant church and school and continue to incur about \$20,000 in monthly costs for the two buildings.

A city redevelopment authority spokeswoman 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, according to the spokeswoman, 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.

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(Boston Redevelopment Authority)

A rendering of the proposed project to rehabilitate the Norbert School building at the Blessed Sacrament campus. The project would not change the existing facility's height or footprint, according to filings with the city.

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