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City gives final approval to project at former Home for Little Wanderers site in Jamaica Plain

Posted by Matt Rocheleau November 13, 2012 10:50 AM

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(Boston Redevelopment Authority)

A rendering of the project at 161 South Huntington Ave.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

A \$75 million proposal to replace the former Home for Little Wanderers complex in Jamaica Plain with a 196-unit housing development received final approval in City Hall Tuesday morning amid strong opposition from some neighbors.

The seven-member Zoning Board of Appeals voted unanimously in favor during a packed hearing that included about an hour of testimony both for and against the project.

"I think we've heard more testimony than we have on anything in a long time," said appeals board chair Robert Shortsleeve.

Boston Residential Group plans to build a four- and five-story building called Olmsted Place on a 3.5-acre site at 161 South Huntington Ave. with apartments ranging in size from studios to three-bedrooms, and a garage with 147 parking

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spaces and another nine at-grade spots. There will also be Zipcar service on site and the developer will build a new shelter at a nearby stop for the MBTA's Route 39 bus.

Construction on the project is scheduled to begin in April and the building should be ready for occupancy by spring 2014, officials have said. The project is expected to create about 200 union construction jobs and 10 permanent jobs.

City officials said the developer [made concessions](#) by making the building less imposing, agreeing not to rent to students, and pledging to make more of the units available as affordable housing.

But some neighbors said the 253,000 square-foot complex is still [too big](#), has too few affordably priced units, and calls for the [destruction](#) of the 98-year-old [Knight Children's Center](#) building that they would like preserved.

Residents have also said they are wary of [other significant development](#) proposed, underway and recently completed within a quarter-mile stretch of S. Huntington near where Jamaica Plain and Mission Hill meet.

Because of community concern over the area's ongoing and potential changes, the city's redevelopment authority is launching a study of the South Huntington Avenue corridor.

"We need to have a better idea of how this street should look like and be like for the next five to 10 years," Kairos Shen, planning director for the Boston Redevelopment Authority said in a recent phone interview. "The goal of this study is to give the community and the development community a clearer idea of what the city and the community's expectation would be for any new development."

Officials at the authority have said they do not want the study to stop or delay development proposals.

The authority will use the study to determine whether any further action – including creating a master plan or making zoning changes – will be needed for the area, Shen said. The strip of South Huntington Avenue is part of a broad section of Jamaica Plain that was last rezoned nearly two decades ago. The city formally adopted the current zoning on Sept. 7, 1993.

“If there are things in this study the community and we need to codify, we’ll figure out then what method and tool we can use to do that,” he said.

The study will cover a three-quarter mile stretch of South Huntington, from its intersection with Huntington Avenue to where it meets Perkins Street. The study will focus on development issues including: housing mix and affordability, transportation, parking, historic preservation, open space, access to green space, and the height, density, setbacks and use of buildings, according to Shen.

The site at 161 S. Huntington was proposed for development after the Home for Little Wanderers, a 213-year-old child and family services nonprofit, [announced](#) it could not afford to stay in its aging buildings there. The agency [vacated](#) the site this fall, relocating some programs and services to its 166-acre campus in Walpole.

City regulators are reviewing another housing proposal nearby at [105A S. Huntington](#), that would clear a 1.1-acre wooded lot for a 12-story, 195-unit building, with a parking garage and retail.

At 201 South Huntington, next door to the former Little Wanderers site, sits an 85-year-old building that housed the [Goddard House](#) nursing home until early September when it [abruptly closed](#). Goddard’s nonprofit board has not announced plans for the two-acre property. Some expect it will soon be proposed for redevelopment.

A 39-room boutique hotel opened this summer at 81 S. Huntington, replacing a former nursing home next door to the wooded lot at 105A S. Huntington.

Across the street at 150 S. Huntington, a five-story, 500-space parking garage is [under construction](#) on the Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center campus.

And, about a half-mile away, the redevelopment of the former Blessed Sacrament church campus on Centre Street [has drawn criticism recently](#) because revised proposals would build a higher mix of market-rate housing than originally planned for the site.

Residents of Jamaica Plain have clashed in recent years over concerns about gentrification in the neighborhood, including a highly-publicized fight last year

over the opening of a [Whole Foods](#) in JP.

City Councilor Michael Ross, who represents Mission Hill, spoke at Tuesday's hearing in support of the project at 161 S. Huntington. He said recently by phone that he backs the plan in part because developers have agreed not to rent to students. He said he'll likely back the 105A S. Huntington proposal if that developer also agrees not to rent to students.

"Both projects are closer to the center of Mission Hill than the center of Jamaica Plain," he said. "To say this is gentrifying Mission Hill is not correct. Mission Hill has been radically altered by off campus student housing speculators. That has caused a form of gentrification far more egregious than anything else that is being suggested these projects will do."

"We're trying to get developers to build housing – not institutional use, not student housing," he added. "Is any project going to be perfect, no, but this is a really good thing for this community."

Ross said that while he respects the opposition from some in Jamaica Plain: "I believe that this is the same group that opposed Whole Foods. I don't represent them. I represent Mission Hill and this has the support of my community. These projects are in the back of Mission Hill, not in Jamaica Plain."

City Councilor Matt O'Malley and Stephen J. Murphy had aides express support for the 161 S. Huntington project on their behalf at the hearing.

Joan Wallace-Benjamin, president and CEO of the Home for Little Wanderers organization, and Jay Walsh, the city's neighborhood development director, also spoke in favor of the project, as did several residents and local union construction workers.

Some in favor wore bright green stickers that said "For the Home, For building."

Throughout the hearing, proponents, including the project's lawyer and developer, cited that the project calls for 20 percent of its units to be designated as affordable. However, the plan for 33 affordable units represents 16.8 percent of the project's total. Six more affordable units would be needed to reach 20 percent.

Curtis Kemeny, president and CEO of Boston Residential Group, declined to comment immediately after the hearing, but said later in an e-mailed statement: "This is an exciting opportunity for us to provide much needed rental housing in Boston and help The Home for Little Wanderers divest of the property and significantly add to their capital campaign."

There was a large contingent of residents who expressed opposition to the proposal at Tuesday's hearing.

An aide for City Councilor Felix Arroyo said the councilor opposed the project. An aide for City Councilor Ayanna Pressley said the councilor had reservations about the proposal. A representative for the Boston Preservation Alliance expressed opposition.

State Representative Jeffrey Sanchez, who represents Jamaica Plain, said recently by phone that he supports the projects at 161 and 105A S. Huntington.

"This is emotional for a lot of folks, because it's market-rate housing," he said. "I always want to see affordable housing – but there are no dollars out there."

"The money that we were able to cobble together for the hundreds of affordable units we were able to build in Jamaica Plain were because we had public land and because the federal, state and local governments stepped up to make them possible," Sanchez added. "With those projects on South Huntington Avenue, they're completely different. Those are private projects on private property."

Opponents of the proposals include many resident members from: the project's city-appointed impact advisory, the Jamaica Pond Association and the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Council.

"It's an attempt to turn South Huntington into luxury, transient sort of housing," neighborhood council chair Benjamin Day said recently by phone.

One week after the Boston Redevelopment Authority [gave its approval](#) for the project at 161 S. Huntington, several residents, including Day, e-mailed to news organizations information they had looked up on a state-run website that tracks political campaign donations.

The findings, [verified by the Globe](#), showed that individuals with companies

seeking permits for the 161. S. Huntington project and the nearby 105A S. Huntington proposal had contributed a total of \$17,000 to the campaigns of local elected officials who represent areas around the proposed project sites. The donations were made while the projects were under city review.

At the Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Council's next meeting, some members of the council expressed disappointment with Day for publicizing the information without seeking their input or notifying them. One long-time member resigned from the council and a former council member has called for Day's resignation.

Day said Tuesday he plans to continue as chair. He said he and the council and others opposed to the project plan to regroup following the zoning board's approval to determine what next steps they might take.

He and others at the hearing said they feel ignored by the city's redevelopment authority and zoning boards.

"They just approved this over nearly unanimous community opposition," Day said after the hearing. "If this development was good for the community you would not have a hard time finding more support."

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