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Event will voice opposition to plan to build condos inside Blessed Sacrament Church in Jamaica Plain

Posted by Matt Rocheleau May 3, 2013 02:42 PM

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(Hyde Square Task Force)

At the event, an Afro-Latin drum circle by Hyde Square Task Force's Musicians In Community. The youth were led by Cornell Coley.

Note: This story was updated Tuesday, May 7 to add the above photo.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

A video projection art piece will be overlaid on the façade of the former Blessed Sacrament Church in Jamaica Plain as part of an event Friday night that bills itself as a rally to stop a controversial plan for the church to be converted into condo units.

Organizers of Friday's event say they want to see the building used as a community space instead of housing.

The Hyde Square Task Force will host the event from 7:30 to 10 p.m. Friday in front of the church "to highlight the iconic importance" of the ornate building located "in the heart of what's known as Boston's 'Latin Quarter,' the rapidly changing Hyde/Jackson neighborhood of Jamaica Plain," organizers said.

The evening will include Afro-Latin music, drum circles, treats provided by the Cupcakery food truck and the public projection of the art piece by MassArt students that "highlights the church's significance within the community," organizers said.

"The church's beautiful architecture will serve as the base for a video projection art piece overlaid on the church façade," said a statement from the Hyde Square Task Force. "The piece will include the sounds, voices and images of community members as they reflect on the church building, the changes to the community, and their hopes for the church's future use as a community space where people can connect and be inspired."

"Hyde Square Task Force hopes to inspire community members, the public, and elected officials to support this architectural treasure as the centerpiece of Boston's vibrant Latin Quarter where people can gather, perform, create community, and celebrate individual, family, and community-wide events," the statement said.

The Archdiocese of Boston closed the church campus in 2004 and sold the

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three-acre property along Centre Street a year later to two co-developers. A master plan to redevelop the campus was approved one year after that, following an extensive community review process.

Since then, 81 housing units have been built on the campus. All of the units constructed so far follow the original plan, including being designated as affordable housing.

But, there are two historic buildings on the campus that have not yet been redeveloped – the 96-year-old church building and the Norbert School building.

Recent proposals for the two buildings [have drawn criticism](#) because each would alter some aspects of the original master plan.

The latest proposal for the Norbert School calls for building 21 market-rate rental units inside. That plan has been criticized because it would cause the overall ratio of affordable housing on the campus to be lower than originally planned. The original master plan called for that building to be kept as a school, but the school moved out in 2009 and the building has been empty since.

The church building proposal has drawn controversy even though it largely follows the 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 church would be converted into between 32 and 34 condominiums, four of which would be designated as affordable housing.

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, developers have said.

The original plan called for the entire 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.

Officials from the co-developers have said they entertained more than 50 ideas

to repurpose the two undeveloped buildings, but the only two that have proved feasible are the ones being worked on presently. The developers have said they have paid a few million dollars to maintain the vacant church and school and continue to incur costs.

But, critics have continued to oppose the proposals.

“The plans for the Norbert School will eliminate 15,000 square feet of space, originally set aside for community uses and the plan to build market rate condos in the church will close off the church forever from the community and for future community uses,” the Hyde Square Task Force said in a statement this week.

“When the campus plan was approved by the Boston Redevelopment Authority in 2006 there was a need for housing, but hundreds of units of mixed income housing have been built in the immediate area since then,” the statement added. “Many residents strongly believe that the church was built for community uses and needs to be reclaimed for those purposes.”

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