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Jamaica Plain neighbors team up to develop empty lot

By **Matt Rocheleau** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 24, 2013

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JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Arthur Johnson (left), Kevin Batt, Barbara Kaplan, and David Bor pooled their resources to buy a vacant lot in their Jamaica Plain neighborhood and are planning to build new housing on the site.

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Residents often devote much time and energy to try to block construction proposals. They might write and call elected officials, air gripes at community meetings, stage protests, or even sue.

But one group of longtime neighbors in Boston's Jamaica Plain section is taking an extraordinarily personal approach to steering development on their street: pooling together more than \$1.5 million of their own money and loans to buy a vacant lot and build housing they helped design.

Their actions represent a rare and bold gambit as booming development is transforming neighborhoods block by block, but also stirring unease for residents who say their concerns often get lost amid the rush to build.

On Robeson Street in Jamaica Plain, the thought of leaving the future of a 15,500-square-foot parcel to the whims of an outside developer worried four neighbors. What if the result was too big, ugly, or noisy? What if there wasn't enough parking?

Of particular worry: Construction would likely involve tearing down the lot's two 50-foot-plus oak trees, each of which is believed to be more than a century old.

“We were concerned a developer would buy the lot and tear down the trees because that would have been the easiest thing to do,” said Arthur Johnson. “We wanted to keep control so we could control the design and so we could control the way the person who built on it treated the landscaping.”

Their teamwork has paid off. In January, the city granted zoning approval to build on the site. The neighbors hope construction will start by fall and be completed by next spring.

Johnson and his partner, Barbara Kaplan; Kevin Batt; and David Bor have lived next door to one another for the past two decades. They were good friends before becoming business partners.

When the grassy, tree-shaded lot — no more than 100 feet from their respective homes — was listed six years ago, the neighbors figured that whoever bought the parcel at 53 Robeson would build soon afterward

So, they bought the land, splitting the \$331,000 cost.

The lot has been empty since 1980, when a house there burned to the ground. It became a beloved grassy spot in the residential area, frequently hosting dog walkers, family picnics, and Wiffle ball games.

“If money was not a factor, we would keep it this way,” said Bor, while he and his three neighbors walked around the property on a recent chilly day.

But the neighbors, who noted that they live a stone's throw from Franklin Park and therefore are not lacking for outdoor space, said they needed to build something on the lot to try to recoup some of their investment.

“We're looking to break even,” Batt said. “If we make a little, that would be great, too.”



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They hired Newton-based architect Tom Huth to help them come up with a plan. In his 30-plus years designing buildings, Huth said, he has never seen residents take charge of building in their own neighborhood like this.

“It is a big investment for three small families to make,” Huth said. “It takes a huge commitment of time and money.”

He said the group is “not your typical developer, in terms of needing to get it to the market quickly. They’re mostly concerned with getting it right.”

Over the past several years, they spent countless hours working with Huth, other neighbors, and city officials to draft the building plans.

Configuring a building that would preserve the lot’s two large trees was challenging. They scrapped nearly a dozen designs before settling on their current plan: a 6,600-square-foot, 2½ story residence.

From the outside, it will resemble the other large, single-family homes on the street. Inside, the design calls for three, three-bedroom townhouses. The units will be sold. There will be two garage parking spots and five more outside.

Construction is expected to cost between \$1.1 million and \$1.3 million. The neighbors are splitting expenses and revenues equally.

Jullianne Doherty, who works as a City Hall liaison to Jamaica Plain, said the project received overwhelming support from other neighbors.

“It was a true model of how the community process should work,” Doherty said.

The neighbors recognize the financial risks they’re taking, but said they have complete confidence in one another.

“We weren’t afraid any of us would drop out or move away,” Kaplan said.

Plus, she added, she and others in the group have experience in development and real estate.

Kaplan, who is retired, previously worked for the nonprofit Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corporation. As a project manager and later as executive director, she helped lead numerous housing and commercial projects, including the organization’s redevelopment of the brewery complex in Jamaica Plain.

Johnson, 66, is a lawyer with experience practicing real estate law. Batt, 64, is also an attorney.

If the project causes any headaches, Bor, 64, can step in: He is chief of medicine at the Cambridge Health Alliance.

But so far the process has been more enjoyable than a bother, the neighbors said.

“We’re a remarkably close neighborhood. We do a lot of things together,” Bor said. “We’re more like family than neighbors.”

Matt Rocheleau can be reached at mjrochele@gmail.com

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