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Salem Church Redevelopment Seen as Key to Revitalization

Transit-Oriented Project Draws Plenty of Praise,
But Opponents Are Taking Their Case to Court

By Aglaia Pikounis

A PROPOSAL TO REDEVELOP A shuttered Catholic church in Salem into mixed-income housing and a community center is being viewed by some city officials and residents as a critical chance to spark revitalization of one of the city's most distressed neighborhoods.

The project, which would create a mix of 97 rental apartments as well as for-sale condominiums at the former St. Joseph's Church, is being held up as a good example of a transit-oriented development because of its close proximity to bus stops and a train station, as well as a large office and industrial park.

But the proposed development has met resistance from groups of city residents who are opposed to the church's demolition and seniors who don't want to see the city's senior center re-

located to the site. Lawsuits have been filed in Essex Superior Court by a group of property owners who are challenging the height and density of a new building that is slated to replace the old church.

Despite the criticism, supporters say the redevelopment will spur more investment in the Point neighborhood – a congested area that is home to city's Latino population – and will bring homeownership opportunities to an area that is mostly comprised of rental housing.

"This is a huge, huge opportunity for the city and that community," said Lisa B. Alberghini, executive director of the Archdiocese of Boston's Planning Office for Urban Affairs, or POUA, which has proposed the redevelopment. "The site is at the nexus of employment and downtown business opportunities and it's an opportunity to bring the Point neighbor-

hood, which historically has been very distressed and low-income, into the vibrancy of city life."

POUA, which purchased the four-building church complex last year and received city permits to redevelop the site in September, wants to demolish the church and replace it with a 75-unit building consisting of one-, two- and three-bedroom units. Thirty of the units will be rented to households earning no more than 60 percent of the area median income, while the rest of the units will be sold as condos.

The ground floor of the building would house an 18,000-square-foot community life center that will be owned and managed by the city. The city wants to relocate the old senior center on Broad Street to the new building's community life center. The center would be used by seniors during the day and open to the commu-

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This artist's rendering depicts a proposed development that would replace the former St. Joseph's Church in Salem. The project, which would include mixed-income housing and a community center, has drawn both support and opposition.

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nity in the evenings.

The new building, which will face Lafayette Street and include parking at the back, would be located across the street from a park where homeless people currently congregate and drug activity reportedly occurs.

As part of the proposal, the site's rectory would be converted into eight for-sale condominiums, ranging in size from 830 to 1,050 square feet, and the school building would be converted to 14 condos, ranging in size from 810 square feet to 1,415 square feet. Alberghini said 15 of the 67 for-sale condos will be affordable to moderate-income families earning no more than 80 percent of the area median income.

POUA wants to begin construction of the project, estimated to cost between \$30 million and \$32 million, next summer.

'Visionary Approach'

Lucy Corchado, a lifelong Salem resident and a city councilor who represents the area, said the majority of the residents she's spoken to are welcoming the project.

Corchado said the project not only would bring sorely needed homeownership opportunities to the neighborhood, but it also will create a community center for which neighbors have lobbied for years. And she and other city officials hope that the project will lead to other improvements.

"We have an issue with some absentee landlords and there are some buildings and apartments that are in bad shape. We're hoping that with the reinvestment, folks will take care of their property and also become more involved in the neighborhood," she said.

But Corchado, a former St. Joseph's

parishioner who attended the church's school as a young girl, acknowledged that there are seniors who have opposed relocating the senior center to the new location.

Groups of seniors recently protested at flu clinics in the city. Seniors have expressed concern about parking, traffic and crime in the area. Some also have said they want a center that they don't have to share with other community groups.

"I think it's unfortunate that there is so much resistance. I feel there are a lot of racial undertones ... that they don't want to come to this particular neighborhood because there is a lot of crime," said Corchado.

"A lot of it is fear," added Corchado, who noted that crime and drug activity is spread throughout the city. "I'm just hoping that folks can really see the redevelopment there and give it a chance – give the development a chance, give the neighborhood a chance. You don't know until you're there and I think it would be unfortunate to lose the opportunity."

Alberghini met with Mayor Kimberley Driscoll in January before POUA submitted plans. It was then that the mayor first introduced her idea of including a community center as part of the redevelopment.

"It's a very visionary approach to this site," said Alberghini.

In an e-mail, she explained: "I think St. Joseph's is especially interesting in that it represents an incredible opportunity for the Point neighborhood and the city itself. The mayor's vision is extraordinary, and you don't often see local leaders going out on a limb as she has for what she truly believes is in the best interests of the residents of the city. While the community life center in the new building to be constructed is first and foremost to be a sen-

ior center, the notion of shared space there in the late afternoon and evenings is a great way to foster and encourage inter-generational relationships, use city resources most efficiently and also provide for the local neighborhood."

But the community center isn't the only aspect that is drawing criticism.

This fall, a group of property owners filed lawsuits challenging the decisions by the Planning Board and Zoning Board of Appeals that paved the way for the redevelopment.

Linda Locke, a Salem resident who owns three rental properties in the Point neighborhood, said the lawsuits object to the proposed 6-story 75-unit building because it is too tall and dense and doesn't fit the character of the neighborhood.

Locke, who said she is in favor of more affordable housing and a new community center in the neighborhood, questioned whether the proposed project will revitalize the Point neighborhood. Plans call for the development to be located at the "perimeter" of the neighborhood and separated from the rest of the neighborhood by a parking lot and fence, she noted. Because of its location, Locke said, residents of the new building aren't likely to interact with the rest of the neighborhood.

"If it was smack in the middle of the neighborhood, it would force these people to take note" of criminal activity or trash or other nuisances and take action about them, she explained. "But if you're on the perimeter you can come and go to the building and avoid the neighborhood."

Locke is one of the residents who object to the church's demolition because of its architectural significance. The church, which was built in 1950, is an International Style structure.

But POUA's Alberghini said the church is in poor condition structurally and can't

be redeveloped because of its layout.

"You would have to put loads and loads of windows in it to renovate it for housing," said Alberghini. "When you finish with that building it wouldn't look anything like what it looks like today, and you would so distort any value of it architecturally that it just really doesn't make sense."

A study for the site, which was commissioned by the city and issued late last year, confirms that the church "is limited as to future uses without significant modifications." The study also showed that a developer could build as many as 167 housing units on the site.

Alberghini said the proposed project "embodies" smart-growth and transit-oriented development principles because of its location near public transportation and jobs.

The 2.7-acre site is situated at the gateway to the Point and other downtown neighborhoods, she said. It is within a quarter of a mile of the city's central business district and Shetland Park, a 1.5 million-square-foot office and industrial complex that is home to a number of the city's large employers.

The parcel also is within a tenth of a mile of a covered bus stop and near two other bus stops that POUA plans to cover. The commuter rail is within a half-mile of the site.

Other projects near the church that are in the works or that are being considered, including a Harbor Walk, could gain momentum because of the redevelopment of the church complex, according to Alberghini.

"This development can help leverage other development," she said. ■

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