

City Weekly

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BROOKLINE

St. Aidan's makeover gains final blessing

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An affordable-housing development on the site in Brookline where John F. Kennedy was baptized might finally, after more than six years of public debate and a court settlement, break ground this fall.

Key to the resuscitation of St. Aidan's — a 59-unit condominium and apartment project that has been a long-running source of controversy — was \$1.6 million in federal and town housing funds controlled by the Board of Selectmen.

The board voted unanimously late last month to approve the funding, though some members had said years ago that they would never spend another penny on the project.

At public hearings last month, opponents contended that the board should have held the line, or never started down the path of re-development.

"This is a place full of home and dreams and spirit," said Patricia Connors, a resident who has fought for years to save the historic church. "It should serve a public purpose, to honor Kennedy's historic place in the town, the nation, and the world."

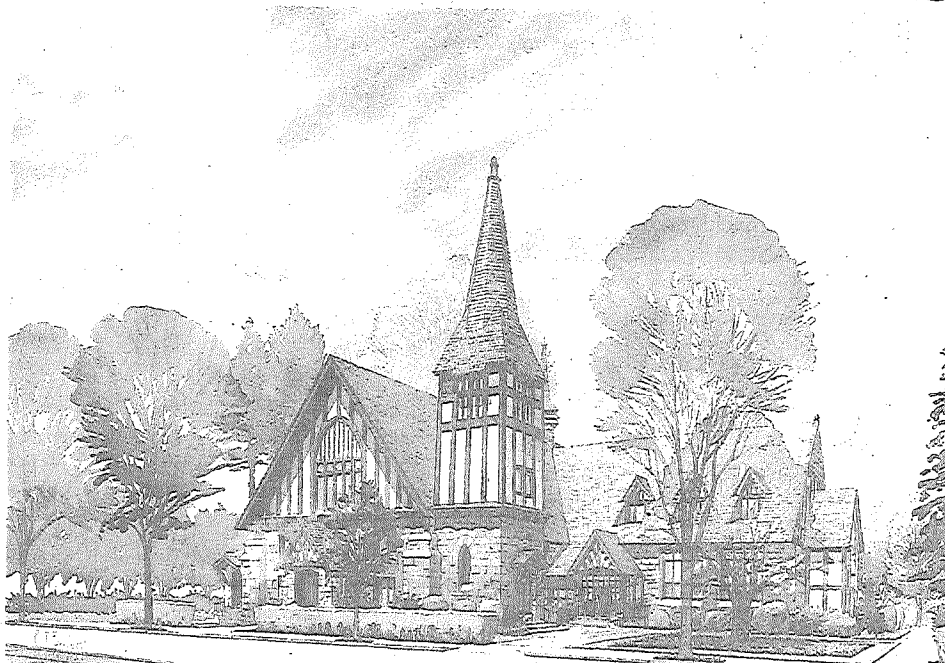
Weighing in by e-mail was resident Jacqueline Baum, who wrote, "I am troubled by Brookline's continuing policy to throw good money after bad."

But most urged the board to move ahead. The alternative, many said, would be worse — a large development built under Chapter 40B, which exempts a development from local zoning ordinances if at least 20 percent of the housing units meet the state's criteria for being affordable.

"Because of our rising cost of real estate, we are losing our diversity," said Gil Hoy, chairman of the Board of Selectmen. "Our police and fire personnel, our teachers used to live in town. Now they are unable to do so."

Ann Stitt, a former sacristan at St. Aidan's Church, noted how far the project had come from the developer's initial 140-unit behemoth, which would have demolished the church building.

As currently proposed, there



PLANNING OFFICE FOR URBAN AFFAIRS

A designer's view of the former St. Aidan's in Brookline after it is converted into luxury condos.

would be 36 units — condos and rentals — classified as affordable in a new, five-story building; nine luxury units in the former church; and 14 market-rate townhouses in two buildings. Parking would be underground to preserve open space and an old copper beech tree. Proponents say it would create more affordable housing in Brookline than any other project in decades.

Prices for the below-market units are estimated to range from \$147,600 for one-bedroom units to \$225,000 for a two-bedroom unit. The luxury units are expected to sell for \$975,000 to \$1.5 million.

Last month's vote brings the total contribution of federal and local funds to \$6.12 million, including \$3.8 million from the town's Housing Trust. These funds will help the developer cover shortfalls resulting from such factors as delays and rising material costs.

Housing advocates say that the \$36 million development, scheduled to be finished in 2010, is still a good investment of Housing Trust funds, which are raised mostly through a so-called linkage fee charged to developers of small-

er projects (six to 15 units) that do not include affordable housing.

"This is an extensive housing collaboration between the town, the neighbors, and the developer," said Roger Blood, the Housing Advisory Board's chairman. "This could have been a much larger 40B project, but we have saved open space, the historic St. Aidan's church building, and a treasured beech tree, put parking underground, and gotten 36 affordable units, or more than 60 percent of the total."

Blood said the development will not deplete the Housing Trust, which still has \$5 million and expects nearly \$2 million in linkage fees over the next two years.

According to advisory board member Steve Heikin, it has been difficult to find projects in which to invest trust funds. The only other substantial project on the horizon is an affordable development on town land at Fisher Hill, which has also been mired in controversy for years.

Some speakers at last month's hearings questioned the funding.

"I've heard many promises that this project would not come back for more money," said Regina

Frawley, a Town Meeting member. "Will this be the end of the hand-outs?"

Lisa Alberghini, director of the Planning Office for Urban Affairs, said she does not expect more overruns. Founded by the Archdiocese of Boston, the planning office is a private, nonprofit organization committed to building affordable housing.

Alberghini said construction was ready to begin in the summer of 2005, but was delayed by litigation. About 75 residents filed a lawsuit in September 2005 to challenge the design and prevent the town from contributing \$1 million to the project. The case was settled last fall.

In the meantime, costs increased 13 percent, Alberghini said. She noted that in return for the \$6 million in assistance, the town would see the 36 units kept affordable in perpetuity.

"This development has accommodated quite a variety of agendas," said Frank Caro, a Town Meeting member from the neighborhood. "The costs escalated while we engaged in a prolonged public process. This is Brookline. We live by process."