

By Neal Simpson  
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HANOVER — The rain stopped just long enough for Cardinal Sean O'Malley, the head of the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston, to stick a shovel in the ground and bless several acres of upturned soil and concrete foundations in a cleared field near Route 139.

The archbishop was in Hanover for the official groundbreaking of a \$11.5 million affordable housing project for seniors backed by the archdiocese's development arm, the Planning Office for Urban Affairs. The three-story clapboard building, called Barstow Village, is expected to open early next year and will include 66 affordable rental apartments for seniors.

"All of us are acutely aware of the housing crisis and the need for housing for seniors," Cardinal O'Malley said at the groundbreaking on Tuesday. "This will be a wonderful opportunity to serve that need."

The planning office, which is organizationally independent from the archdiocese, has developed 28 affordable housing projects in Massachusetts since it was founded by Cardinal Richard Cushing in 1969. But the organization hasn't sponsored an project on the South Shore since 1983, when Kent Village, a 66-unit affordable development in Scituate, was built.

"It's just a matter of where the opportunities are," said Lisa Alberghini, the organization's president. "We've been busy in a lot of other communities."

The planning office was founded to help fulfill the archdiocese's social justice ministry and operates as an independent non-profit organization with no financial ties to the archdiocese or the Catholic church. Cardinal O'Malley is a member of the office, but does not sit on the board of trustees or hold a leadership role.

The organization specializes in developing surplus archdiocese property and has converted several former parishes into affordable condos and rental units in recent years. But about half of the office's projects, like Barstow Village, involve public or private property and have no connection to the church, according to Chief Operating Officer Bill Grogan.

The office became interested in building in Hanover in 2009 when the town began seeking developers for a 6.6-acre tract of land adjacent to an affordable housing project built by the Hanover Housing Authority on Legion Drive in 1983. The office worked with Braintree developer EA Fish to craft a proposal and was chosen to develop the land later that year.

Construction at Barstow Village began a little over a month ago and is expected to wrap up as soon as February. Peabody Properties, which will manage the property, has already started to market the apartments to potential renters, holding two informational meetings at Hanover's Council on Aging.

The Barstow Village project marks an important milestone for town officials: With its completion, 10 percent of the Hanover's housing will be considered affordable by the state, meaning the town will no longer be susceptible to projects under Chapter 40B, a state law that allows affordable housing developers to circumvent many local zoning laws.

Reach Neal Simpson at [nesimpson@ledger.com](mailto:nesimpson@ledger.com).

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