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Archdiocese behind push on housing

By John Laidler

The Archdiocese of Boston has made the north-of-Boston region a focus of its efforts to develop low- and moderate-income housing.

The Planning Office for Urban Affairs, the development arm of the archdiocese, recently completed the \$20 million conversion of a former factory building in downtown Haverhill to 57 rental apartments, all but five of them affordable, and three commercial units.

The nonprofit also recently broke ground on an \$8.3 million project to develop 41 units of affordable senior housing behind the Saint Theresa of Lisieux Parish, in Billerica.

The completion of the Haverhill development, Hayes at Railroad Square, and the start of the Billerica project, Rose Hill Manor, were the subject of separate recent ceremonies attended by Cardinal Sean O'Malley.

The Planning Office, meanwhile, received approval from the Salem Planning Board in September for a \$20 million project to develop 76 mixed-income housing units, retail space, and a community center on the site of the former St. Joseph's Church on Lafayette Street. Lisa Alberghini, president of the Planning Office, said the group intends to break ground next spring, provided it secures needed state financing.

And last year, the Planning Office completed work on a 40-unit senior housing development in Lowell that it built for the Sisters of Charity of Ottawa adjacent to an independent-living facility and a nursing home that is also run by that group.

"Our objective on behalf of the archdiocese is to bring our social justice work to all regions of the archdiocese," Alberghini said.

"We've focused on the North Shore to try to increase the affordable housing in that region, and it's a deliberate strategy," she said.

Financed through state and federal grants, loans, and tax credits, and a bank loan, the Haverhill project brought back to productive use an old factory building that has been largely idle for about half a century.

Alberghini said the 52 affordable units include 33 priced for households earning up to 60 percent of area median income, and 19 for those earning up to 80 percent.

Depending on market conditions, the 19 units may be converted to homeownership units after five years.

Haverhill officials say the project contributes to an ongoing revitalization of the downtown that the city sought to promote through adoption in 2006 of a smart-growth zone that encouraged residential and mixed-used development.

Including the Hayes project and three other factory conversions that preceded it, more than 500 housing units have been built downtown in the past few years, according to city officials.

Haverhill Mayor James J. Fiorentini said the garage is being financed in part from revenues the Planning Office is paying to have its tenants park on city property, currently a surface lot and, once it opens, the garage.

“It’s a double win for us,” he said of the project. “We get people into the downtown. I’ve always felt that bringing in people means you bring in business to the downtown. And we get the parking garage.”

Alberghini said her office is pleased at the outcome of the Haverhill project, which also involved an environmental cleanup of the site.

“We think it’s creative because it has these different income tiers and opportunities for homeownership. We’re thrilled it’s contributing to the revitalization of the downtown,” she said.

Alberghini said parishioners from Saint Theresa of Lisieux Parish were the driving force behind the Billerica project.

“This was a great story of parish involvement in social justice work,” she said. “They said we have this resource in our backyard: land. What can we do with it to further the mission of the church?”

The project was permitted under the state's affordable-housing law, Chapter 40B, which allows developers to bypass local zoning if they include affordable units. But Alberghini said it was a "friendly 40B," noting that her office worked closely with and had the support of town leaders.

"It was a proposal by the church, and the town worked with them to put together an affordable-housing complex that meets the needs of the community," said John C. Curran, the town manager.

The Salem plan calls for locating apartments or condominiums in the old St. Joseph's school and rectory and apartments in a proposed new building, which would also have commercial space and a community center on its ground floor.

Alberghini said her office, for now, is not pursuing an alternative that calls for a pharmacy on the ground floor of the new building.

"The redevelopment of this key site on an important entrance corridor will not only be good for the Point Neighborhood, but will enhance the city as a whole through additional affordable housing and tax revenue," Salem Mayor Kimberley L. Driscoll said in a statement. "The city . . . looks forward to this important neighborhood revitalization project moving forward."