

Closed Church Properties Continue Their Mission



Above: Rep. John F. Tierney (D-MA-6) speaks at the groundbreaking for the St. Jean Baptiste Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative. Below: The former St. Jean Baptiste church.

In December, the Planning Office for Urban Affairs (POUA) held a groundbreaking ceremony for the St. Jean Baptiste Neighborhood Revitalization Initiative in Lynn, Massachusetts. After standing vacant for nearly 10 years, the St. Jean Baptiste parish buildings are being razed to make way for the construction of a mixed-use development.

The redeveloped site will feature 24 affordable apartments that are being funded in part by the Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston's Affordable Housing Program (AHP). The POUA is also creating 14 first-time-buyer units and a community facility.

"The property is actually spread out over a whole block," says Lisa Alberghini, executive director of the POUA. "It has a church, rectory, school, parish hall, and gymnasium. But the buildings are problematic structurally. They have been abandoned for a long time and aren't arranged in a way that maximizes what we can do with them."

"So we're demolishing all of that and putting a rental development along the main street and homeownership units along the more residential side of the block," she explains. "This will do a lot to bring back a neighborhood where there's been a lot of disinvestment."

The POUA and member Fleet National Bank worked together to win a \$187,568 AHP grant and \$1.07 million subsidized AHP advance to support the project. This makes St. Jean Baptiste one of three former Archdiocese properties being redeveloped with the help of AHP funding.

In Brookline, Massachusetts, Wainwright Bank & Trust Company is using \$900,000 in subsidized AHP advances to provide permanent financing for the development of St. Aidan's — the church of President John F. Kennedy's baptism and childhood. Wainwright Bank also won a \$300,000 AHP grant on behalf of the development.

Now, after a long and sensitive community-review process, the church will soon serve as a focal point in a much-needed mixed-income development.

"We initially planned to demolish the church," says Alberghini, but "many local residents believed that it was important to keep it for its historic value, and we agreed to do that."

However — as is the case with many older churches — the developer found it would be financially infeasible to adapt the stone and stucco structure for affordable housing.

"To make it economically viable, we'd have had to put a lot of units in there," said Alberghini. "And the more units you put in, the more openings you have to create for windows and doors, and the more you are changing the building's character — which is exactly what the neighborhood didn't want."

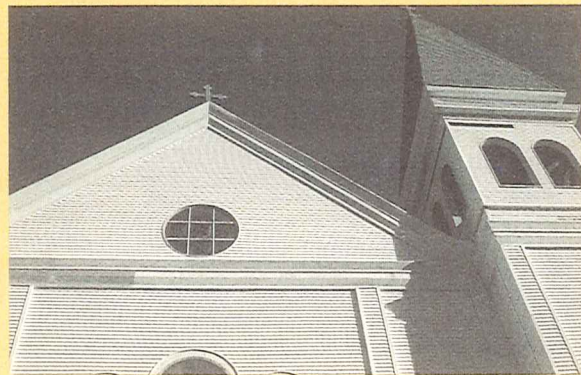
Instead, nine market-rate condominiums will be built in the historic Tudor-style church. The proceeds will help subsidize the construction of three new buildings on the site. An existing rectory and garage will be demolished and a large parking lot redeveloped to create 14 affordable condominiums in two buildings and a 36-unit mixed-income development that offers both affordable condominiums and apartments.

Meanwhile, in Boston's Hyde Park neighborhood, the POUA and Hyde Park Cooperative Bank tapped a \$250,000 AHP grant to pay the hard construction costs for the Riley House initiative. This adaptive reuse of the former Most Precious Blood Convent will provide 40 affordable units of elderly housing.

"The convent building at that site works well, so this one we can renovate," notes Alberghini. "Old schools and convents are a lot easier to retrofit or adapt for reuse than most churches."

In recent years, the Archdiocese of Boston has consolidated or closed a number of parishes and churches. And late last year, it announced plans to close a significant number more due to financial pressures, shrinking congregations, fewer people entering the clergy, and population shifts to outlying suburbs.

"It is encouraging to see parish properties such as St. Jean Baptiste retain a public purpose," says Rep. John F. Tierney (D-MA-6). "For many working families in Massachusetts, affordable housing is far too often out of reach." ■



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