

# Fighting homelessness, and ‘not in my backyard’

Two proposals to convert hotels into supportive housing have riled neighbors in Dorchester and Charlestown

By [Shirley Leung](#) Globe Columnist, Updated December 7, 2022, 7:19 p.m.



The Constitution Inn in the Charlestown Navy Yard, a closed hotel that is being proposed for conversion to permanent supportive housing for homeless people. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

The proposals would provide just the kind of housing that officials say we need to combat homelessness. One sits on a [concrete island in Dorchester](#) between Morrissey

Boulevard and the train tracks. The other is nestled in the Charlestown Navy Yard, three blocks from the harbor.


But both are facing stiff opposition from local residents: Not in my backyard, even when there's a [humanitarian crisis unfolding in the streets of the city](#).

The fear, this time, is that the tents and open-air drug market that flourish on Massachusetts Avenue and Melnea Cass Boulevard will move into these quieter neighborhoods.

The truth is that the hundreds of people who congregate by [Mass. and Cass every day](#) represent the most urgent cases of the region's homelessness and opioid epidemic. What's being proposed in Dorchester and Charlestown — converting hotels into subsidized apartments for people emerging from homelessness — would serve a very different clientele.

Potential tenants would need to be chronically homeless and go through an extensive application process including rigorous criminal background checks and a screening process to see if they could thrive there. Both proposals create so-called permanent supportive housing — subsidized apartments that have around-the-clock staff on site such as case managers and access to other services. There will also be security.

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“You can’t just walk in. It’s not like a shelter,” said Lyndia Downie, president of the Pine Street Inn, which is partnering with the Community Builders to convert the Comfort Inn in Dorchester into 104 studio apartments.

Pine Street is best known for its South End shelter that provides a place to sleep for about 500 people nightly. But in recent years, the nonprofit has been serving more people who are getting off the streets by operating 850 units of permanent affordable housing in the region, including 83 apartments in Dorchester.

Downie has invited concerned neighbors for tours of its Dorchester sites, a newly constructed building on Hamilton Street and the other on Bowdoin Street in a former convent of St. Peter’s Parish.

“There’s a horrible fear factor around homelessness. Understandably, people are afraid,” said Downie. “We’re not perfect. Stuff does happen, but for the most part, once we get into a neighborhood, it becomes part of the neighborhood so you don’t hear a whole lot more.”



The intersection of Massachusetts Avenue and Melnea Cass Boulevard this past summer. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Dorchester City Councilor Frank Baker said opposition has been fierce. He holds Pine Street in high regard, but is worried that if 20 homeless people from Mass. and Cass had nowhere to go and the Comfort Inn had room, they would be allowed to stay there.

He said people from Mass. and Cass already are filtering into his district riding Bluebikes down Dorchester Avenue and Morrissey. That has people upset about this proposal, he said, noting the hundreds who showed up at a community meeting in September to oppose it.

“I’m not sure that Mass. and Cass isn’t coming this way,” said Baker. “That community down there does not want it. I have to stand with them.”

In Charlestown, St. Francis House is partnering with the Planning Office for Urban Affairs, the nonprofit housing development arm of the Archdiocese of Boston. They’ve worked together before on permanent supportive housing in Downtown Crossing.

This time they're proposing to convert the Constitution Inn, currently owned by the YMCA of Greater Boston, into 126 units of affordable housing — a mix of studios, and one and two bedrooms. Some 96 units will be geared to people transitioning out of homelessness, while the rest will be more traditional affordable housing for households with annual incomes of \$55,000 to \$75,000.

St. Francis, which provides homelessness services, and the Planning Office, which has built over 3,000 affordable housing units, have been meeting with Charlestown residents since the summer. They're still in early stages and say they want to work with the community to shape the project. But as in Dorchester, neighbors have been wary. Rumors have been rampant on how the Constitution Inn could become a homeless shelter, a drug treatment center, and house low-level sex offenders.

None of that is happening.

“This is not a treatment program, not a rehab program, not a recovery home,” said Karen LaFrazia, president of St. Francis House. “This is an apartment building and to ensure successful tenancies we will have staff on site 24/7 to provide support services to residents.”

The YMCA operates the Constitution Inn, along with a fitness center, on land leased from the Boston Planning & Development Agency. For nearly three decades, the YMCA ran a private transitional housing program for women and children out of the building on Third Avenue. In 2019, the nonprofit decided that operating the hotel was out of its area of expertise and put the property up for sale, though the YMCA plans to stay in Charlestown at another location.



The Harborwalk in Charlestown is a short walk from the Constitution Inn, which is now closed. JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Reflecting the opposition in his district, Representative Dan Ryan in an Oct. 28 letter to the BPDA asked that the city “shelve this project for the foreseeable future. The community is not ready to engage in this dialogue now.”

Hotels have become a popular option for permanent supportive housing. Both Pine Street Inn and St. Francis House began leasing suddenly empty hotels to get people off the streets in the early days of the pandemic. Having individual rooms helped reduce the spread of COVID-19 in the homeless population.

Both providers liked the setup and saw how it would be easier and less costly to convert hotels into permanent housing by adding kitchenettes to each room. At the same time, some hotel owners were eager to sell, concerned that business may be slow for the foreseeable future.

One such conversion has already taken place in Brockton with homeless nonprofit Father Bill's & MainSpring turning a motel into the 69-unit [Roadway Apartments](#).

Perhaps it's par for the course that Bostonians would raise a ruckus over new development. But this time the stakes are higher with rents and home prices soaring to new heights. That means even more people will be priced out and displaced.

The nonprofits behind the Dorchester and Charlestown proposals know what they're doing is difficult and delicate. They want to listen and work with the community. For example, in Charlestown, the feedback from residents is for gender balance in the units and allotments for specific populations, such as veterans. The Planning Office and St. Francis are now exploring those revisions.

What Andy Waxman, the regional vice president at the Community Builders who is working on the Dorchester proposal, hears a lot is: "Why are you doing this in our neighborhood? You should do it in your neighborhood."

Waxman lives in Jamaica Plain, about two blocks from where Pine Street operates supportive housing for 50 residents and about four blocks from another housing project by Pine Street and Community Builders. Construction is underway, but only after the developers [settled a lawsuit from a neighboring property owner](#).

His response: "I am doing this in my neighborhood."

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