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POLITICS

Mass. housing crisis: Could vacant church land be the answer?

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The former Blessed Sacrament Church in Jamaica Plain is being redeveloped into housing. (Juliet Schulman-Hall)



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BOSTON — Massachusetts residents' prayers for more housing could soon be answered, though maybe not in the way they expected.

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Recent analysis by the Lynch Foundation and Lincoln Institute of Land Policy found at least 4,850 vacant parcels of land across Massachusetts owned by faith-based organizations. Lynch Executive Director Katie Everett said Thursday that if just half of those were developed for housing, it could create 500,000 new homes and generate \$60 million in annual tax revenue.

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Right now, that scale of development would be incredibly difficult, if not virtually impossible, to achieve. But legislation currently on Beacon Hill could bring it a few big steps closer.

“We know there’s faith communities that are waiting, and have been waiting,” Everett said during a forum hosted by the Citizens’ Housing and Planning Association Thursday morning.

The bill — nicknamed YIGBY, or “Yes in God’s Backyard” — is part of a [larger housing package](#) being reviewed by the state Senate. In its current form, it would allow religious organizations such as churches, synagogues and other faith-based groups to build multifamily housing on land they have owned for at least three years, regardless of local zoning. At least 20% of the units in a development must be designated affordable housing.

Though religious organizations are usually tax-exempt, housing built under this regulation would be subject to property taxes, unless the individual city or town grants an exemption.

Similar laws have been passed or introduced in California, Minnesota, Oregon and Washington in the past few years.

Many religious organizations, large and small, are already building or running housing. Others provide shelter or other services for homeless or struggling residents, programs that could be expanded with on-site housing.

“Houses of worship are each different, with different issues, different challenges and different potential opportunities,” said Emilio Dorcely, CEO of the nonprofit Urban Edge. “But many, many of them are very mission-focused and are very aligned with the mission and the importance of providing affordable housing.”

The Catholic Archdiocese of Boston created its Planning Office of Urban Affairs in 1969 specifically for this purpose and it has created 3,200 homes to date, with another 1,500 on the way, according to Real Estate Director Shaina Korman-Houston.

But it’s not easy to do. Korman-Houston gave the example of POUA’s plan to redevelop a 19-acre property in Brockton that houses the Convent of the Sisters of Jesus Crucified, much of which is unused former farmland.

The first phase of the project and will create 106 affordable apartments for varying income levels and 15 affordable condominiums. In the future, when the convent’s current occupants are retired or gone, the building will be converted to more housing.

Korman-Houston said POUA has been working with the convent for a decade to get the development started, but only this year are they finally expecting to break ground. That’s mostly due to the amount of time necessary to get zoning changed, which was needed before they could even apply for funding from the state.

If the YIGBY bill had been in place from the beginning, she said the timeline could have been reduced by at least five years.

“We would have had fewer legal bills. We would have had less building costs. Interest rates were lower back then. Construction was less expensive back then. We probably would not have faced the same pressure during the zoning process ... so there could have been deeper affordability,” Korman-Houston said. “So let’s celebrate the win. But at the same time, let’s think about all of those things that happened because we zoned the project for five, six years.”

These projects are often beneficial to not just the residents who get to live in them, but the faith-based organizations, too. John Yazwinski, president and CEO of [Father Bill’s & MainSpring](#), a nonprofit fighting homelessness on the South Shore, said the organization has worked with small, struggling churches to give them financial support while also providing a community benefit.

In Plymouth, Father Bill’s recently purchased the building and property occupied by First Baptist Church to build a new Housing Resource Center. The center will operate as an emergency shelter and create 16 units of permanent supportive housing for people coming out of homelessness.

Yazwinski said the organization had previously partnered with the church and he knew that the small congregation was struggling to make payments on a roof replacement. By purchasing the property, Father Bill's gave the church an influx of cash, and the organization is leasing the sanctuary and offices back to the church at no cost.

"It's a win-win for both parties," he said.

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