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Lt. Gov. Kim Driscoll joins stakeholders and officials in breaking ground on the development at 41 LaGrange Street in downtown Boston. The 19-story, 126-unit mixed-income housing development is expected to be completed in 2026. Pilot photo/Wes Cipolla

St. Francis House, Planning Office break ground on downtown Boston affordable housing

Wes Cipolla Pilot Staff LOCAL FRIDAY 27TH OF SEPTEMBER 2024

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BOSTON -- As president and CEO of Boston's St. Francis House, the largest day shelter for homeless and impoverished people in Massachusetts, Karen LaFrazia is used to hearing her residents wonder where they will find an affordable place to live. More than 500 people stay at St. Francis House each day, LaFrazia said, and communities throughout Massachusetts have "unprecedented numbers" of people living in shelters.

"Guests will come up to me, stop me on the street, and say, 'Can you find me a home?'" she said.

She and her colleagues vowed to help, and partnered with the Planning Office of Urban Affairs, a ministry of the Archdiocese of Boston dedicated to combating Massachusetts's affordable housing crisis, to do so. On Sept. 24, a ceremonial groundbreaking was held at 41 LaGrange Street in downtown Boston, steps away from Chinatown, the Theater District, and Tufts Medical Center, for a 19-story, 126-unit mixed-income housing development. Seventy of those units have been reserved for formerly-homeless people.

41 LaGrange Street was the product of a collaboration between POUA, St. Francis House, the City of Boston, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, and private companies. Construction is planned to conclude in 2026.

"Developing affordable housing is not for the faint of heart," she said, "but when you have such wonderful partners that make days like today possible, it will and has brought immense joy to your heart."

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LaFrazia thanked neighborhood residents who wrote letters to their representatives and attended community meetings to support new housing for working-class adults and families.

"Amidst all the luxury housing being built in downtown Boston, they, too, can find an affordable home," she said, "and in this new residence, people with diverse backgrounds and life experiences are going to become neighbors."

POUA President Bill Grogan said that in the midst of Massachusetts's housing crisis, the new development is a sign of hope.

"The groundbreaking of 41 LaGrange comes at a critically important time," he said. "The high cost of housing, the lack of meaningful, affordable rental opportunities, and the zoning restrictions in place that inhibit development are seriously hurting individuals, families, and our communities, and has created the crisis that we're in today."

Msgr. Bryan Hehir, the Archdiocese of Boston's secretary of health and social services, delivered the blessing. He prayed for 41 LaGrange Street's future residents and said that the teamwork done on the project should be considered sacred.

"Behind every building there's a vision," he said, "and the vision that Karen just outlined for us can be crystalized, I think, not only as a shelter, but shelter over the human dignity of each person."

41 LaGrange Street marked the fifth collaboration between POUA and MassHousing, an independent organization which provides loans to homeowners and developers of affordable housing.

"You take on developments with the greatest challenges," MassHousing Vice President of Multifamily Programs Mark Teden told Grogan. "Where others would be hesitant, you step in, and are willing to provide amazing opportunities to those who are most vulnerable in our population."

He said that when it comes to affordable housing projects, the more in need a population is, the harder it often is for housing to be built for them.

"Despite this irony, you and your team are dogged in your pursuit and commitment to serving those most in need," he told Grogan, "and we honor and celebrate both the Planning Office and St. Francis House for your shared vision and commitments."

Massachusetts Lt. Gov. Kim Driscoll said that the development would not have been possible without POUA's "degree of excellence, of commitment and tenacity and the patience sometimes that it takes" to get the project off the ground. The land that 41 LaGrange Street will be built on, formerly part of the Boston Young Men's Christian Union, was first purchased in 2012.

"I want to thank you for your continued fight in this struggle to address the housing needs that we have in the Commonwealth," she said.

She described the future residents of 41 LaGrange Street as "the folks you work with every day, somebody who's pouring your coffee, the individual who's handing you something over a counter, who delivered your Amazon box."

"You can be very wealthy and have done well for yourself and live around the corner from someone who delivers your newspaper or who helps with your kid or cares for an older adult," she said. "That's what makes a city liveable. That's what makes a city a city."

"You're literally living next to multimillionaires and people that are making \$30,000 a year washing dishes," said Boston City Councilman Ed Flynn, an advocate for the development, "and that's what Boston is really all about. Everybody supporting each other, treating each other with respect and dignity."