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Archdiocese downtown housing opens in August: Preserving the old, welcoming the new

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HAVERTHILL — The third major factory-to-housing development in the shadow of the downtown train station is nearly ready to open its doors.

Hayes at RailroadSquare will welcome its first tenants in mid-August, said William Grogan, chief operating officer for the Planning Office for Urban Affairs. The nonprofit Planning Office for Urban Affairs, which is building the homes, is an affiliate of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston.

The factory-turned-residential complex on Granite Street is to include 57 one- and two-bedroom apartments, most of which will be reserved for low- and middle-income renters. There also is space set aside on the first floor of the seven-story building for three businesses, which are likely to include professional offices and perhaps a convenience store, Grogan said.

The developer is planning a lottery May 25 at the All Saints Parish hall for the affordable apartments, Grogan said. The agency will hold an informational meeting on the lottery April 28 at 6 p.m. at the church hall, 120 Bellevue Ave.

"We're starting to promote the lottery in local papers and we are planning to hang banners downtown," said Molly Ekerdt, a project manager and policy coordinator for the Planning Office for Urban Affairs.

The development is among more than 600 apartments and condominiums built or planned downtown, most in old, vacant factories.

Ekerdt said her agency is planning to open a leasing office in Railroad Square soon to inform prospective tenants about the Hayes development.

Rent for the affordable apartments will be between \$750 and \$1,075 per month for the one-bedroom apartments and \$930 to \$1,275 for the two-bedroom apartments, Grogan said. The affordable apartments are for people and families who make 50 to 80 percent of the median income for the Greater Haverhill area, Grogan said. Eighty percent of the median income for a family of four in the area, for instance, is \$64,000 a year, Grogan said. So to qualify for one of the discounted apartments, a family of four must make less than \$64,000 a year, he said.

More than a century of history

The Hayes building, originally a box-making factory that served the city's shoe industry, was built in 1894. It faces the Washington Street train station and is across from Railroad Square, where the city is set to break ground in June on a \$10 million parking garage.

The developer has secured 57 spaces for tenants in the parking garage. There also will be 19 spaces in a lot being renovated at the corner of Granite and Essex streets and six spaces in a lot on the opposite side of the building. The developer recently cleaned the 19-space lot, which was polluted.

Cardinal Sean O'Malley, archbishop of the Boston Archdiocese, and Gov. Deval Patrick are expected to visit Haverhill in late September for a ribbon-cutting ceremony, Grogan said.

The project was the state's first under a new law called Chapter 40R. That law makes it easier and faster for developers to obtain permits for housing projects near transportation hubs in urban centers. It also gives money on a per-unit basis to communities that adopt 40R districts in their downtowns.

New jobs for now, new homes coming

A recent tour of the 81,000-square-foot Hayes building revealed a beehive of activity. Grogan said as many as 30 construction workers are on the job at any one time and that it has brought more than 150 construction jobs to the area.

The apartments have large wooden beams overhead and some have brick walls. All of them have oversized windows overlooking downtown. The units are between 700 and 1,500 square feet each.

Workers began the first phase of the project in September, demolishing the interior, installing new electrical, plumbing and fire suppression systems, and cleaning the exterior.

The property is assessed around \$500,000, Grogan said. When the development is ready for occupants, the city will review the building and increase the assessment based on the new apartments, which will mean millions in tax revenue for the city, he said.

The property at 14-44 Granite St. is actually two historic mills — one built in 1894 and a taller addition built in 1911.

Mayor James Fiorentini said the city's adoption of the Chapter 40R law two years ago played a major role in the archdiocese choosing Haverhill for the project.

The city used the law to establish a 53-acre zone downtown where building housing is faster, easier and potentially less costly than outside the zone, he said. Proposals in the

district are no longer subject to reviews by multiple city boards and they cannot be stopped by the City Council. Under the old zoning rules, proposals to convert large factories to housing required a special permit from the council. Now, a housing proposal in the zone only needs to meet pre-approved design standards and undergo a review by the council.

The \$75 million, 305-unit Hamel Mills Lofts built by Forest City Enterprises of Cleveland opened last year. The \$39 million, 146-unit Cordovan complex on Locust Street was the first of the large factory-to-housing conversions.

The Planning Office for Urban Affairs has built more than 2,400 units of housing to date. Those developments account for more than \$400 million invested throughout metropolitan Boston, according to agency's Web site.