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Dorchester Reporter

St. Kevin's campus re-opens as affordable housing site

By **Jennifer Smith, Reporter Staff**

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The former St. Kevin's Parish campus will continue to be a place of community and sanctuary, officials said last week at the opening of the St. Kevin's Redevelopment at Uphams Crossing.

Mayor Martin Walsh, other government officials, and Cardinal Sean O'Malley gathered last Thursday for a ribbon-cutting ceremony to celebrate the construction of 80 new units of affordable housing at the Columbia Road site.

Two new buildings rise from the courtyard: a five-story complex containing 47 units stands in place of the demolished school building at 530 Columbia Rd., and a 12-unit building now occupies the site of the former church, convent, and office building at 35 Bird St. The grounds of the onetime school building also contain 1,000 square feet of community space. The last building on the Redevelopment site, containing 21 units at 516 Columbia Rd., was rehabbed and given a third floor.

All told, the complex spans 2.63 acres, bounded by Davern Avenue, Bird Street, Columbia Road, and Virginia Street.

Lisa B. Alberghini, president of the Planning Office for Urban Affairs, which is affiliated with the archdiocese of Boston, led the ceremony on a sunny afternoon. A children's choir from the Pope John Paul II Catholic Academy sang at the beginning of the festivities.

For the 80 units of housing, 20 of which were set aside for homeless families, Alberghini said they received about 3,500 applications before they had to stop accepting them. The homeless-designated units were distributed by lottery.

"This illustrates an astounding need for more permanent affordable housing," she said.

Years in the making, the opening concluded efforts to repurpose the former school grounds, which closed in 2008 after the creation of the Pope John Paul II Academy system. The Planning Office of Urban Affairs, Inc., which handles development projects; St. Mary's Center for Women & Children, which will provide some of the services to residents units; and Holy Family Parish, which used to own the property, collaborated on the 2010 housing bid.

"One of the great things about Boston is we preserve the past to build the future," said Mayor Walsh, who recalled often stopping into St. Kevin's for a prayer as he and his mother were out grocery shopping.

Some attendees received squares of stained glass from the old church. Others, including state Sen. Linda Dorcea Forry, who attended St. Kevin's school, state Rep. Evandro Carvalho, and City Councillor Frank Baker, were given gifts by the cardinal.

Christine Wright, 30, and her 8-year-old daughter Gianna were recipients of one of the homeless housing units. Speaking at the ceremony, Wright was teary-eyed and beaming. "We have a place we can call our own home, a place where we can be at peace," she said.

Earlier, Wright and her daughter had moved to a shelter after a particularly bad episode of domestic abuse. When she saw the applications for the St. Kevin's property, she jumped at the chance, and seven months later was on her way to a new home, the second on the lottery list. "It is a blessing from God," she said.