

New life: Long vacant school now apartments

Sharon preserves historic building and provides affordable homes

**By Frank Dicesare
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QUINCY — While many upscale cities and towns struggle with the concept of affordable housing, Sharon officials addressed the issue and preserved a beloved building in the process.

The town just celebrated the opening of a \$29-million apartment complex that will provide homes for residents of different income levels, including those eligible for affordable housing.

Located on the site of the former Charles R. Wilber School on South Main Street, the 53,600-square-foot building houses 75 apartments, including 22 units that have been reserved for affordable housing. Fifteen of these affordable units have been reserved for individuals and families who earn less than 50 percent of Sharon's median income of \$74,648. The other seven affordable units have been set aside for those making less than the town's median income.

Currently, 27 out of the 75 apartments are occupied. Another 10 apartments have deposits on them. Residents began moving into the complex on Jan. 15.

The market-rate one bedroom apartments range in price from \$1,570 to \$1,800 a month, and range in size from 720 to 915 square feet. The market-rate two bedroom units range in price from \$2,090 to \$2,550 a month, and range in size between 1,000 and 1,300 square feet. The comparable affordable units rent for less than half those prices.

Sharon's affordable housing stock accounts for only 6.4 percent of its total homes, according to the Massachusetts Affordable Housing Alliance.

The school's transformation from a vacant building to a mixed-income apartment complex caps a nearly 30-year journey to revive the structure since its closure in 1981. During that time, Sharon town officials and residents examined several possible municipal uses for the building, none of which were implemented.

Plans for the building's reuse continued to stall until 2007 when the town hired Beacon Communities of Boston and Frontier Properties Inc. of Canton to remodel the school into apartments that would also house affordable units. Because the project contained an affordable housing element, developers received a comprehensive permit through the state's Chapter 40B program, which enabled them to bypass local zoning restrictions and begin work on the site.

"The Wilber School building is one the Town of Sharon hung onto, they didn't sell it off," said Josh Cohen, development director for Beacon Communities. "It's a building that means a lot to this community. Because of this, we wanted to see its facade preserved as well as some of its unique interior features."

Part of the Wilber School apartment project was financed through federal and state tax credits for low-income housing and historic rehabilitation. Cohen said the historic rehabilitation tax credit required developers to work in compliance with the National Park Service's guidelines for historic rehabs.

"Those guidelines are quite strict and have a lot to do with maintaining the exterior appearance of the historic structure, as well as certain interior features," Cohen added. "The Park Service felt very strongly that the dimensions of the school's original corridors be maintained as well as some of its original classroom doors."

The project's developers also kept many of the school's original blackboards and lockers to preserve the building's historic identity and charm. The building, which is listed on the Massachusetts Registry of Historic Places, has been nominated for placement on the National Registry of Historic Places.

Clark Ziegler, executive director of the Massachusetts Housing Partnership, said the project's success is an example of town officials and developers sharing a common vision and goal.

"This was a community-initiated project," said Ziegler, whose organization participated in the project's financing. "A lot of times you get projects where there is tension between communities and neighbors and developers. But to have a development that was very carefully planned and thought through really makes the point that when a housing development is done right, it is really a net asset for a community."