



Long-Shuttered School Transformed Into Wilber School Apartments

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Sharon, Mass.—A vintage 1920s school in Sharon, Mass. has been renovated and combined with complementary new structures to create a 105,000-square-foot apartment complex featuring 75 affordable and market-rate residences. The Wilber School Apartments, a collaboration of Beacon Communities L.L.C., Frontier Enterprises, and architect Prellwitz Chilinski Associates (PCA) Inc., is also vying for LEED certification.

Built in 1922 in downtown Sharon, the Charles R. Wilber building—named after the town’s only native to die in World War I—served as a secondary school, high school and municipal facility before closing in 1981. It stood vacant until development partners Beacon and Frontier won approval for a residential renovation in 2006, aided by a design from PCA in which historic preservation and sustainable design were combined.

The project caters to a mix of income levels. Fifteen apartments are designated affordable to households earning up to 50 percent of the area median income; three of those fifteen are reserved for households earning up to 30 percent of the area median income; and seven are designated as workforce housing for households earning up to 100 percent of the area median income.

A new wing complements the fully restored school building through brick construction, a bow-front façade, and a top-floor cornice that aligns with the original and allows for a fourth floor with new materials. A slim glass connection serves as a front door that both “marries” and separates the two buildings to honor their individual character, says the developer. The common areas and every residence have elements reflecting the historic character and function of the structure, such as the refurbished student locker doors lining the wide hallways and the small school blackboards that accent the units’ modern kitchens.

The old school happens to be adjacent to a commuter rail station, so the project meets “smart-growth” and transit-oriented development criteria. Other sustainable building technologies unheard of in 1922 (or 1981, for that matter) were built into the project, including an onsite wastewater

treatment plant, as well as high-efficiency plumbing and electric fixtures, which will result in energy savings of 35 percent compared to homes built to current code, according to the architect. The project is pending certification under the U.S. Green Building Council's LEED-for-Homes program.

“In general, LEED Certification helps accelerate building tours and leasing because it assures prospective tenants that they're moving into a high performance building—one that will keep their energy costs low,” Josh Cohen, development director at Beacon Communities and project manager for the Wilber School Apartments, tells MHN. “We've seen this at Wilber School, where multiple tenants have cited LEED-level design as the difference-maker in their choice, for both building performance and because it reflects their personal values. The energy-efficient design, low-VOC finishes, and other green design features at Wilber School Apartments have been important to many of the people who decided to move to our building.”

Cohen adds that both the affordability and historic nature of the project have also been strong attractions to tenants. “The younger tenants I've spoken with generally focused on the fact that the project offered a unique type of housing that the Sharon community had lacked: affordable, environmentally conscious apartment living,” he says. “Most of the older residents dwelled on the building's history. Many mentioned how excited they were that the building was being re-used after standing vacant for decades, and just about everyone knew people who had gone to school there a generation ago.”

Considering the hurdles to development posed by the recession, financing the project was complicated, notes the developer. Part of the \$29 million project is financed through federal and state low-income housing tax credits and historic rehabilitation tax credits, which were purchased by AEGON USA Realty Advisors to generate more than \$15 million in equity financing. MassDevelopment has also issued \$14 million in tax-exempt bonds for construction and permanent financing, which was underwritten by RBC Capital and guaranteed by Bank of America during the construction phase and by Massachusetts Housing Partnership upon completion and occupancy of the project (it is now 40 percent occupied). This financing enabled the developers to borrow funds at a 4.11 percent rate that's fixed for the first 12 years of the 18-year term of the loan.

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