

## Brookline Church Transforming To Mixed-Income Development

By Aglaia Pikounis

Construction crews could begin transforming a closed Brookline church into mixed-income housing as soon as next month.

The construction will come after more than six years of community meetings, debates and a lawsuit that was settled last year.

The Planning Office for Urban Affairs is building a 59-unit development with a mix of apartments and condos at St. Aidan's Church near Coolidge Corner. The \$36 million project will include 36 units affordable to families earning up to 80 percent of the area median income, which is \$66,150 for a four-person household.

"It's probably the most affordable housing being added at any time for at least two decades" in Brookline, according to Fran Price, the town's housing development manager.

The town has committed \$6.1 million in federal and local money for the project, which has infuriated some residents who say it's excessive.

Roger Blood, chairman of Brookline's Housing Advisory Board, said there was some concern expressed about too many local resources and housing units concentrated in one neighborhood.

"Many different types of objections were raised," during the process, acknowledged Blood.

But Blood defended the project, noting that the housing development includes fewer units than the developer originally proposed. "As affordable housing advocates, we made a great effort to end up with a project that was compatible with the neighborhood," he said.

When the Archdiocese of Boston shuttered St. Aidan's Church in 1999 after the parish merged with St. Mary's, the Planning Office for Urban Affairs pitched a plan to build a 140-unit condo development under the state's comprehensive permitting law. The Planning Office for Urban Affairs, or POUA, is an Archdiocese-affiliated nonprofit affordable housing developer.

Price said the condo complex would have required demolition of the church and the loss of the church courtyard and a tree that neighbors wanted saved. After discussions with town officials, the developer revised its proposal. POUA submitted a plan to build 74 units, with 58 affordable units, in 2002.

POUA made a series of adjustments and after rounds of community meetings, trimmed the project to 59 units.

'Quite Reasonable'

Construction was about to begin in October 2005, when residents and abutters filed a lawsuit. The delays in the project, costs associated with



The Planning Office for Urban Affairs is developing the former St. Aidan's Church in Brookline into a 59-unit, mixed-income housing development.

fighting a 2005 lawsuit brought by residents and abutters and a jump in construction costs, forced the developer to ultimately reduce the number of affordable units, according to Price.

Construction costs increased approximately \$3.5 million since the lawsuit was filed, and the overall project costs rose more than \$4.2 million, POUA Chief Operating Officer William Grogan said in an e-mail.

The delays and cost jumps also meant that developer needed the town to kick-in more resources. The town is investing \$170,000 per unit in local resources, which is significantly higher than originally proposed, according to Blood.

Prior to the lawsuit, the town was going to invest "well under \$100,000" per unit, said Blood. "The original proposal was almost too good to be true," he said.

Blood maintains that investment of public funds is reasonable. "The \$170,000 is quite reasonable compared with both other opportunities we see in our town and in neighboring communities," he said.

And he noted that project will help the town with maintaining its diversity at a time when home prices and rents are out of reach for many working families. The median price for single-family homes sold in Brookline through this July was \$965,000 and the median condo price was \$443,000, according to The Warren Group,

publisher of Banker & Tradesman.

The project size and number of affordable units is the largest in at least a decade, said Blood. Under the town's inclusionary zoning, developers are required to set aside 15 percent of units for lower-income households. At the St. Aidan's project, 60 percent of the units will be affordable.

Construction of the project is expected to start at the end of September. Price said the church, where John F. Kennedy was baptized, will be converted into nine triplex luxury condos that are "dramatic" in design.

The luxury units will range in size from 2,300 square feet to 3,500 square feet and will include four bedrooms and multiple bathrooms. Prices are expected to range from \$1.2 million to \$1.7 million, according to Mona Wiener, one of three agents at Hammond Residential GMAC in Brookline who is marketing the luxury units.

Most of the units will incorporate the historical features of the church, including select original stained-glass windows. Each luxury condo also will include two underground parking spaces. The exterior of the church is being preserved.

"It's a great location," said Wiener.

Two buildings will include 14 market-rate townhouses. A 5-story building with 20 affordable apartments and 16 condos will be constructed.

Construction is expected to take about 16 months.