

[EDITORIAL](#)

\$2 billion redevelopment will turn public housing into mixed-income community

Constructed in the 1930s, the Mary Ellen McCormack complex in South Boston is overdue for a new look — and a new vision.

By [The Editorial Board](#) Updated December 19, 2023, 4:00 a.m.



Instead of a traditional, isolated public housing complex devoted completely to low-income tenants, the new Mary Ellen McCormack housing will include units for different income levels and amenities that connect the community to the rest of South Boston. THE ARCHITECTURAL TEAM

The Mary Ellen McCormack public housing complex in South Boston is a place that defines “concentrated poverty.”

Surveys done by Rebekah Levine Coley, a Boston College psychology professor who has been studying the community since 2018, found residents there worry about substance use, violence, and deferred maintenance. According to in-person interviews with 523 heads of household over the last two years by developer WinnCompanies, working with Boston College researchers, only 28 percent of adults who are able to work are employed at a living wage, and nearly 60 percent of adults report poor physical and mental health.

An [ambitious plan](#) to rebuild the public housing complex and turn it into a mixed-income community has the potential to transform the neighborhood.

Equally important, data collected from a study of the redevelopment effort will help determine whether the mixed-income model can provide a template for additional public housing rehabs in the future.

The Mary Ellen McCormack, New England's first public housing development built as the Old Harbor Housing Project in the 1930s, contains 1,016 units housing more than 2,000 low-income residents in a mix of row houses and apartments. It spans 30 acres with few amenities.

WinnCompanies received approval from the Boston Planning and Development Agency on Thursday to proceed with a \$2 billion, 20-year construction plan, which is slated to begin around June 2024, to triple the number of housing units on the site. Under the proposal, each existing unit would be replaced with a new unit with the same income eligibility, and current tenants would have rights to a renovated unit.

In the plan's first phase, to be built between 2024 and 2032, there would be 529 units for low-income tenants; 45 to 90 units for tenants earning 80 to 120 percent of area median income; and around 700 market-rate units, spread across nine buildings.

There would be ground-floor retail. A tenant task force would work with the YMCA of Greater Boston and local service organizations to build a YMCA and a community center and provide child care, workforce training, senior programs, and other services.

The project's first stage will cost \$1.1 billion, according to WinnCompanies' estimates, including \$50 million each from the city of Boston and state sources, with most financing coming from low-income housing tax credits, mortgage debt, and private equity investment. Market-rate units would subsidize the affordable units.

Roads would be redesigned so pedestrians and drivers could pass through the complex to get from Dorchester Avenue to Moakley Park and the waterfront. The complex would include green spaces and a community garden. Boston Housing Authority administrator Kenzie Bok said early affordable housing complexes were built as self-contained communities, an approach that has fallen out of favor. Part of the goal of the current project is to integrate the complex into the surrounding neighborhood.

The land is partially on a flood plain, and the proposal would elevate buildings to address flooding concerns.

The redevelopment, when complete, would create much-needed housing at multiple income levels while replacing outdated units. As Gilbert Winn, CEO of WinnCompanies, envisions, it would turn the public housing complex into “a mixed-income community people choose to live in.”

A [similar mixed-income](#) project is already underway at the Bunker Hill public housing complex in Charlestown.

The Mary Ellen McCormack would also provide a proving ground for how to develop mixed-income communities. The federal government began prioritizing mixed-income housing in the 1990s in response to concerns around distressed public housing. But attempts at building these developments have had mixed results. Existing residents are often displaced by renovations and unable to return. According to [a study by](#) Case Western Reserve University researchers Mark Joseph and Miyoung Yoon, renovations have led to decreased crime and a greater sense of stability, but low-income residents often feel marginalized by their higher income neighbors.

The Winn proposal aims to address many of these concerns — limiting displacement by building in phases and guaranteeing residents the right to a new unit, creating gathering spaces where residents can mingle, and offering services to help low-income residents advance economically.

Coley and Samantha Teixeira, a Boston College associate professor of social work, secured a \$3.3 million grant from the National Institutes of Health to study residents’ experiences over several years through surveys, interviews, air quality sampling, testing of hair samples to determine stress levels, and reviews of student records. The study will examine the effects on physical and mental health of higher quality housing, mixed-income housing, and housing stability versus displacement, considering age, gender, race, and ethnicity. It will attempt to answer questions like: Does the stress and dislocation inherent in construction and moving counteract the benefits of improved housing? How do residents respond to dramatic changes in their neighborhood? As higher income families move in, do children from poor families benefit from their new neighbors or suffer from discrimination?

“We’d expect power dynamics will change, and people’s day to day experiences with neighbors will change,” Coley said.

The project appears to be a good way to revitalize a struggling community and help its residents while creating more housing. The inclusion of the research study will ensure the developer is held accountable for realizing that promise.

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