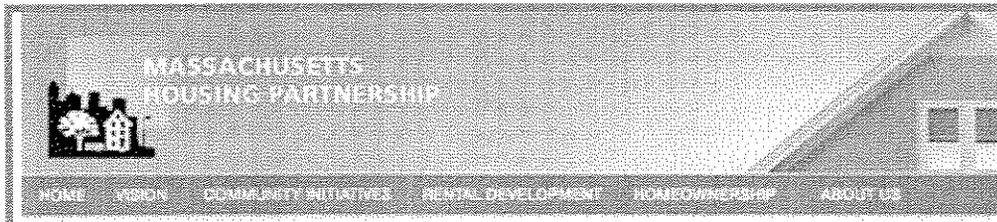


Kim DeNigro

From: MHP [rlodi@mhp.net]
Sent: Wednesday, February 07, 2007 12:53 PM
To: Planning Department
Subject: Ebulletin: How town saved old school for housing



MASSACHUSETTS HOUSING PARTNERSHIP

HOME VISION COMMUNITY INITIATIVES RENTAL DEVELOPMENT HOMEOWNERSHIP ABOUT US

How Acton saved historic school from bulldozer

Memories will live on; building will be transformed into rental housing

(Note: MHP periodically issues e-bulletins to help in the development of affordable housing. If you have a comment or want to suggest another topic, click [here](#). To view previous ebulletins, click [here](#)).

BOSTON, Feb. 7, 2007 --- In the coming months, residents of Acton will no doubt notice that construction workers have started the job of turning the old high school into affordable housing. But what should not be forgotten is all the hard work put in by the Acton Community Housing Corporation (ACHC) to get this project off the ground.

Since 2001, ACHC worked alongside town leaders, community members, and developers, persevering in its vision to create affordable housing in Acton. In December 2006, the town signed a lease with Common Ground Development Corporation, marking the beginning of the final chapter in the school's long road to redevelopment.

The effort began as a fight to save the historic school from demolition. Built in 1925 as Acton's first high school, the Towne School could not compete with state-of-the-art classrooms that were built on adjacent lots, and it eventually closed. But when the school committee proposed the demolition of the school to make room for a playground, community members spurred by historic preservationists voiced their opposition by voting to return the property to the town.

Gaining public support

At this point, selectmen approached ACHC in hopes that they would find a way to redevelop the school as affordable housing. They, in turn, approached the Massachusetts Housing Partnership (MHP) for guidance and support.

MHP's Community Housing Initiatives team, led by director Rita Farrell, hired consultants and performed feasibility analyses which concluded that the school site would be amenable for affordable housing.

Armed with these results and with Farrell's support, Nancy Tavernier, president of ACHC, faced her opponents at a second town meeting in April 2002, where a citizen petition had called for another vote in favor of the school's demolition. Tavernier let the facts speak for themselves.

"A town salary chart revealed that if our employees had their salaries as their sole household income, 85 percent of them would be eligible for affordable housing," Tavernier recalls. "You could hear a pin drop when I said that."

Preparing for development

Once again, Acton community members voted against demolition of the school, clearing the way for ACHC and MHP to proceed with affordable housing plans. For the next three years, MHP worked closely with ACHC, providing support when needed, including funding for environmental studies, help to develop a financial plan, and selection of a developer for the effort.

When lease negotiations with a Cambridge non-profit fell through in 2005, ACHC members refused to give up. They stood their ground and worked with MHP to reconfigure the lease details, and then submitted another request for proposals from developers.

In 2006, Acton began negotiations with Common Ground Development Corporation to redevelop the school into affordable housing. With a long-term lease now signed, Common Ground will lead the development through the final stage of this long journey.

"This is an example of what towns can accomplish when they have the will to do housing," Farrell said. "Especially because this was ACHC's first attempt to develop rental housing, their perseverance and commitment were key to getting it done."

An experienced developer

Common Ground will redevelop the historic Towne School into 17 units of mixed income affordable housing. The effort is located within walking distance to downtown services, retail establishments, schools, and the commuter rail, and 70 percent of the units will be reserved for Acton residents.

In addition, no less than 40 percent of the units will be affordable to residents earning 60 percent of the area median income, which is \$50,460 for a household of four. At least 20 percent of the units will be affordable to households earning 50 percent of the area median income, which in Acton is \$42,050 for a household of four.

This is not the first time that Common Ground develops affordable housing on town-owned land. In 2005, Common Ground signed a long-term lease with Westford to develop 15 units of affordable housing.

In the Westford effort, MHP provided Common Ground with \$1.3 million in long-term first-mortgage financing and another \$750,000 in zero-interest deferred payment second-mortgage financing. To read more about this effort, click [here](#).

MHP workshops

If you're interested in hearing more, MHP is offering three regional workshops around the state to help communities identify and initiate small-scale affordable housing development. For more information, click [here](#).

To Unsubscribe, please [click here](#).