

Brookline Tab

Jun 09, 2010

Affordable housing comes to former Brookline Church

By John Hilliard/Staff Writer

When St. Aidan's Church closed nearly 11 years ago, Mary Martha Mahlmann was among those parishioners who lost a spiritual home.

But Mahlmann would find her way back, this time as a resident of the housing erected on the former church's property.

"I belonged to the church for so many years, it was like coming home again," said Mahlmann.

Mahlmann's roots run deep into the parish: Mahlmann grew up on Adams Street and attended school at St. Aidan's as a child. Mahlmann's mother worked for 20 years after retirement as the parish's secretary, leaving only when St. Aidan's closed in 1999.

She was active in efforts to preserve the church building from demolition, and remembered the differing opinions in those days over its fate. Some wanted housing, others community space, and there were some who wanted the church torn down.

While no one was happy at the loss of a church, they took solace in what project developers did with St. Aidan's.

"It was nice to have it adapted for use for a variety of affordable housing," Mahlmann said.

Mixed emotions

Inside Mahlmann's Crowninshield Road living room on Tuesday afternoon, the hardwood floors shone beautifully in the afternoon sun, and the walls, still looking freshly painted, show how new her home is. She's been here since October, and has gotten to know some of her neighbors — a courtyard framed by the separate buildings is just outside her window.

She has a piece of the stained glass windows collected from the church; these pieces were given out to participants in a dedication ceremony held at the property last week.

"The church was beautiful, it was like a country church," Mahlmann said.

But more than a decade after a historic church closed its doors — and developers, neighbors and town officials battled over the future of the former St. Aidan's parish — mixed feelings still brew over St. Aidan's new life as a housing complex.

"It just showed the community getting together and working as positively as possible ... it all worked out in the end," said Evelyn Roll, a Town Meeting member and Adams Street resident active in the debate that turned a church into a housing complex.

For Patricia Connors, once a St. Aidan's parishioner who served on the neighborhood committee that fought the demolition of the church, Brookline lost a historic building.

"I viewed it as one of the town's cherished buildings, and the town let it get away," said Connors, who said the church was significant to the local Irish-American community.

Roger Blood, who has served for 15 years as chairman of the Housing Advisory Board, said officials were proud to see the project open to residents. It was his board that oversaw the town's financial contribution to the development.

"Anybody in Brookline who is familiar with St. Aidan's or involved with the development over the years should be thrilled with" the project, he said.

Last week, the town held a dedication ceremony for the housing project, attended by Congressman Barney Frank, D-4th; Cardinal Sean O'Malley; local officials, including Selectmen Chairwoman Betsy DeWitt; several project investors and state housing officials.

Road from church to home

The former parish was named for St. Aidan, an Irishman who converted parts of northern England to Christianity in the seventh century and now remembered for his work with the poor. The church building itself was erected in 1911, and retains its name from its days as a place of worship.

In July 1999, the Archdiocese of Boston essentially closed St. Aidan's Church, combining the parish with St. Mary's of the Assumption in Brookline Village. Church officials cited dwindling attendance at St. Aidan's, but were dealing with similar issues when it combined Infant Jesus parish with St. Lawrence on Route 9 that year.

Ultimately, the joint Infant Jesus-St. Lawrence parish was merged with St. Mary's as well a few years later.

Roll recalled the talk among neighbors that the church was going to be closed in 1999. She wasn't a parishioner, but she was among those worried the building would be demolished.

She said neighbors successfully pushed back on the original idea — knocking down the church and erecting a 144-unit complex — and got a smaller project that preserved the church building. The smaller project also would have less of an impact on the school system, she said.

The church was part of the town's legacy: It's on the National Register of Historic Places, and was the home parish to the Kennedy political clan; both John F. Kennedy and Robert F. Kennedy were baptized there.

By 2002, plans called for a 74-unit project, with 58 of them offered as affordable housing under state housing laws. The town would also put up \$2.3 million from a fund set aside to support such projects.

Now the St. Aidan is home to 59 units, including nine luxury condos in the church itself, and units spread among three other buildings on the lot. Twenty of those units are rentals, and the remaining homes up for sale to first-time home buyers.

According to the developer, 54 units are now occupied.

Market woes and a lawsuit

But the project was mired for years in controversy. Some neighbors worried that the scope of the project was too large — many of the units would be built in new structures on the property, instead of the church itself — and that the town was spending too much on its development.

Blood said the Housing Advisory Board had to approve town money drawn from a special housing fund for the complex — a figure that grew from an estimated \$2.5 million to more than \$6 million.

The board was constantly reviewing whether the town could help cover the difference in cost between what market-rate condos sell for in Brookline, and whether families with moderate incomes could afford them, he said.

“At each step of the way, there were questions whether the additional millions were worth it. And they definitely were,” said Blood.

He said his board never supported a project that would have been 144 units or more, and noted they worked to keep the size down to emphasize the quality of the units, even preserving trees on the property.

“It’s not a high-rise housing project for segregating poor people,” he said of the project.

A group of 75 neighbors sued the developer, the town and Zoning Board in 2005, but the case was settled the following year in exchange for reducing the size of the project and other terms.

Blood said officials tried to avoid litigation, and noted that the suit caused a delay in the project that forced developers to send the project through a second bidding process. The delay also forced the elimination of several units that would have been earmarked for “upper-moderate income” residents, he said.

The developers of the project, including the Planning Office for Urban Affairs, a branch of the Archdiocese of Boston, also ran into rising building material costs and inflation during planning.

By 2008, a private investor put \$3 million into the project in exchange for corporate tax credits and ownership of the project’s rental units.

After the suit, Roll said neighbors “realized we’d gone as far as we could go,” and have been working closely with the developer and town officials. Even after the project was finished, she credited the town’s building commissioner, Michael Shepard, with being responsive when issues arise, like the sound of the air condition system on the property.

“Everybody felt we all got something out of it,” said Roll.

But the town lost an opportunity to keep a historic structure, said Connors.

While Connors said she is glad that the residents now living there have homes, the church itself should have been preserved as a worship space, or at least a community center. The church building was carved up into nine market-rate luxury units.

It would have been preferable to erect the affordable housing around the church building and keep the church itself open, she said. Connors hasn't been involved with the development for several years, and avoids the church, she said.

"It was too sad for me to see what happened to it," said Connors.

What's ahead with housing

Lisa Alberghini, executive director of the St. Aidan's developer, the Planning Office for Urban Affairs, said developers approached the neighbors in "an extremely open way," and that involvement helped shape the project.

"The public process clearly benefited the project and the community," she said.

Alberghini, whose daughter completed school and graduated from college while Alberghini worked on the St. Aidan's development process, said having a more efficient process would be useful for future housing projects.

Multiple times during the past decade, developers had to restructure the deal as the costs of construction rose due to the time it took to complete the public review of the project.

"If there was a way for things to happen more quickly, that we didn't have to change the structure of the deal [due to delays], that would have been helpful," said Alberghini.

The lawsuit also resulted in cost increases in the project, which delayed construction until the suit was settled, she said.

In a joint statement by O'Malley of the Archdiocese of Boston and Frank, D-4th, the pair said they were pleased to help bring affordable housing to Brookline. Both participated in a dedication ceremony at the housing project last Thursday.

"As we dedicate the St. Aidan, the Archdiocese of Boston is pleased to participate in the ongoing effort to ensure that our neighbors and those in need have access to safe, affordable housing," said O'Malley in the statement.

Frank said the rental units were useful in providing affordable housing for low-income residents, and said he was "grateful" to O'Malley and the archdiocese for helping to provide that housing in Brookline.

Alberghini, who attended the ceremony, called the final project "extraordinary and spectacular" and took satisfaction from the residents who now call St. Aidan's home.

"It makes it all worth it," said Alberghini.

John Hilliard can be reached at john.hilliard@cnc.com or 781-433-8362.