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New development to benefit low, moderate income residents

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Thanks to the efforts of the archdiocese's Planning Office for Urban Affairs, city politicians and public and private financiers, dozens of low and moderate income Bostonians can afford decent housing in an area where many are being priced out of the neighborhood. Their new home, Rollins Square, a mixed income residential community on Washington Street in the South End, was dedicated November 21.

Archbishop Sean P. O'Malley joined members of the Planning Office, Mayor Thomas M. Menino and representatives of several of the 13 organizations that helped finance the project at the ribbon cutting ceremony for the 184 residential-unit development.

The Planning Office for Urban Affairs is an archdiocesan agency dedicated to developing housing for the needy as part of the church's mission of advancing social justice.

Twenty percent of the units in Rollins Square are reserved for low income, formerly homeless people and 40 percent are designated as moderate income units reserved for first time homebuyers. The remaining 40 percent of the development are market rate units. Rollins Square also includes 277 underground parking spaces and 6,000 sq. ft. of retail space.

The impetus for a project like Rollins Square was, in part, spurred by the 2001 report, "A New Paradigm for Housing in Greater Boston," which described the city's "severe affordability gap" between a resident's income and housing costs as a "housing crisis." The report called for "collective responsibility" to build a "supply of housing that is affordable to households of all income levels."

In response to the report, the Planning Office took the lead in developing Rollins Square on the South End property donated by the city. Earlier this year, Lisa B. Alberghini, executive director of the Planning Office, said that the South End location was chosen because a large archdiocesan presence already existed there – the Cathedral of the Holy Cross, Cathedral High School and St. Helena House, an archdiocesan housing development for the elderly.

Those involved in the construction and development of Rollins Square also wanted to provide mixed income living in an area which is becoming increasingly more expensive to live. Rollins Square was built with a "deliberate focus" on middle income housing for first-time home buyers in order "to bridge the housing gap" between the rich and the needy in the neighborhood said Alberghini.

According to Alberghini, the Planning Office received approximately 1,500 requests for the 73 middle income units, representing “astonishing evidence of need,” she said.

At the ceremony, Alberghini introduced Archbishop O’Malley, who made welcoming remarks, as one of the Rollins Square residents’ “newest neighbors.” Archbishop O’Malley recently moved from the archbishop’s residence in Brighton to the rectory of the cathedral.

“We are here celebrating people’s right to decent housing and the success story that has come about because of the wonderful cooperation of the different groups that have worked so hard to bring this together,” said Archbishop O’Malley at the dedication. “Rollins Square is not about one development, but rather it symbolizes a most unusual partnership and extraordinary partnership between government, business and the Church that looks beyond a single dedication ceremony to our collective responsibility and commitment to human dignity in our society and the right to decent housing for every single individual and family.”

Rather than simply fulfilling affordable housing legislation, he called the residents the “true inspiration” for developments like Rollins Square which help the needy and increase diversity in housing communities.

Alberghini next welcomed Mayor Menino, who she described as firmly committed to affordable housing and eager to find solutions to the city’s housing problems. According to Alberghini, the mayor’s office would call her almost every week telling her to “get the units in the ground.”

Looking out upon the development, Menino said, “The wait was worth it. Where can you find such beautiful housing, a good blend of moderate, low income and market rate housing right here on Washington Street in the new South End.”

“We have to continue to work hard to provide for affordable housing for working people,” said the mayor, who designated city resources for the development. “That’s so important to us.”

Alberghini thanked those who had contributed the \$66.5 million needed to finance the project. FleetBoston Financial Corporation was recognized as the lead lender of the \$52 million construction loan and for providing an additional \$3.9 million in equity.

Chad Gifford, chairman and CEO of FleetBoston, told those in attendance, “We make a lot of investments – millions, actually billions in investments – and I’m not sure that there’s an investment, regardless of financial return that we’ll get more satisfaction from than the one tonight.”

Judith Klau, who has been a resident of Rollins Square since August, participated in the ribbon cutting ceremony at the dedication. She described her experience living in the new housing community as a “treat” and an “honor.”

“It’s wonderful how elegant and how generous the space is – for people of modest means that is the best part” of living in Rollins Square she said.

Klau feels that one of the purposes of developing Rollins Square – to bring people together from a range of incomes – is “a promise for people’s future, for the community’s future.”

Since it was established in 1969, the Planning Office for Urban Affairs has completed 1,756 units of affordable, mixed-income housing. The office currently has five projects underway to building approximately 470 units in addition the residences built at Rollins Square.