

100 percent affordable units proposed for 270 Baker Street

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A proposal of 60 “100 percent” affordable rental units at 270 Baker St. is currently under review by the Boston Planning and Development Agency (BPDA). The second (and likely the last) public meeting took place on Nov. 6 at Catholic Memorial High School and was attended by about 20 people.

BPDA Project Manager Stephen Harvey said that this public meeting was going to be similar to the prior September meeting about the project. “We want to make sure everyone in the community understands the plan,” he remarked.

Back in 2017, the 270 Baker St. site was approved for 60 condominium units in two buildings. Earlier this year, the project was put on the market and was purchased by B’nai B’rith Housing. The development was changed from homeownership to 100 percent affordable rentals in one building. This new proposal includes 19 one bedroom units, 35 two bedroom units, and 6 three bedroom units. Fifteen of the units will have an income restriction of up to 90 percent of the area median income (AMI), and 45 units will have an income restriction of up to 60 percent of the AMI.

B’nai B’rith Housing (BBH) is a “regional nonprofit housing developer whose mission is to ease the housing crisis in the Greater Boston area”. They have other affordable housing devel-

opments located in Chestnut Hill, Brighton, Sudbury, and Swampscott. Holly Grace, the Senior Project Manager at BBH, explained that West Roxbury needs “housing options for its residents, many of whom are feeling the pressure of the booming housing market.” Grace stated that obtaining this property in West Roxbury has been a “long and difficult permit process”.

“Currently only three percent of housing in West Roxbury is income restricted, with 52.7 percent of West Roxbury renter households spending more than 30 percent of their income on rent. Our plan will enhance the previous proposal for 270 Baker Street, which we re-named ‘Residences off Baker’ due to neighborhood feedback from the previous meeting,” Grace explained.

Architect Iric Rex, Principal of Davis Square Architects, also presented at the meeting. “We are proposing one building, and the building size will be less apparent from the neighborhood side,” he explained. “It will be in the shape of a U, which means it will have less of a footprint.” Rex also highlighted the significant green open space, including a courtyard, playground, and tree lined walkways. The project will also make significant improvements along Simbroco St.

Kanson-Benanav explained that BBH is promising the same community benefits the previous developer pledged, which

includes removing two blighted houses from Catholic Memorial’s property, donating \$10,000 to the West Roxbury Parkway Little League, improving Simbroco Street, and providing ongoing tax revenue to the city.

After the presentation, various questions, comments and concerns were raised by meeting attendees.

Many neighbors expressed concerns about the parking, claiming there are too few parking spaces. “In our experience, most tenants don’t own multiple cars,” explained Kanson-Benanav. BBH has talked with the owner of a parking lot adjacent to the property, and they plan on leasing parking spots for a potential overflow of night/weekend parking. The developers also noted that the 270 Baker St. site is very transit oriented, the commuter rail is a short walk and there are two bus lines nearby.

“There are a lot of these types [rental and condo] of buildings going up in West Roxbury. Did anyone do a market analysis of the need for such a building?” said one resident. Kanson-Benanav explained that a market analysis was required to receive funding for the project.

“Does this project have any zoning variances?” Asked another meeting attendee. Harvey stated that there are “no zoning variances” for this project.

Another West Roxbury resident remarked that they were not

notified when this project changed from condominiums to rentals earlier this year. A few meeting attendees worry that more rentals equates to a loss of the “community feel” in West Roxbury. “We [West Roxbury] are overrun with rentals. You keep pushing down our throats ‘community’ and ‘community benefits’, but that’s not true.”

After this comment, the discourse between the meeting attendees turned slightly combative. “That is a gross generalization, most people [and families] cannot afford to buy [in the area],” responded another West Roxbury resident.

Another West Roxbury resident, who has rented in the neighborhood for many years, remarked that even though she is a renter, she is very invested in the community. “We, as a neighborhood, should have the capacity to invite people from all walks of life into our community,” she stated. “We should see the benefits of 100 percent affordable housing projects like this.”

Many meeting attendees and West Roxbury community members were “refreshed” to see a project like this proposal. One West Roxbury homeowner noted that his family grew up in an apartment in Dorchester, and were very involved in the community. “I think that this is something we need in the neighborhood, many of the new constructions around the neighborhood are ‘luxury’, many people can’t afford that,” he remarked. The

West Roxbury resident noted the many newly built expensive condos and rentals in the neighborhood, including the residences at 1789 Centre St. and the Oak Row apartments.

One meeting attendee, who lives in Roslindale, chose to speak up in favor of the project. “The city of Boston is growing and changing, and there is a loss in change, but we can also gain from that,” she stated. “I am here tonight because every neighborhood in Boston is dealing with the growth and change [in the neighborhoods of] Boston, not just West Roxbury. This affordable housing is professionally managed. We should be making families and renters feel welcome.”

Harvey explained to the concerned resident that affordable housing differs from regular rental properties. “Most people stay in affordable housing because they want to keep the rent prices,” he explained. Harvey explained that most people/families who live in affordable units are not going to leave after just one year, they will probably stay for awhile - and likely be very invested in the community.

The open comment period for this project end(ed)s on Nov. 8. For more information on this project, visit <http://www.bostonplans.org/projects/development-projects/270-baker-street>. For more information on BBH, visit <https://www.bbhousing.org/>.