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SISTERS OF NOTRE DAME FORGE AN UNUSUAL DEVELOPMENT DEAL TO PROTECT SOUTH BOSTON SCHOOL

By Jon Chesto
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The South Boston real estate market is so hot these days, even the nuns need to be in the development game to stay in the neighborhood.

Just ask the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, whose long history of education and good works in the neighborhood has earned them many fans. But good will doesn't pay the bills.

They run the Notre Dame Education Center on Old Colony Avenue, in a part of Southie that is under intense development pressure and is expected to be rezoned to allow for taller buildings. So when the sisters found out their building was for sale, they did something bold: They bought the quarter-acre property for \$4.5 million in August 2017.

They have since teamed up with a developer to build a six-story apartment building on the property that would also include a 10,000-square-foot condo space on the ground floor that the school would own, free and clear.

"We put everything that we had into buying the property," said Sister Anne Malone, who sits on Notre Dame's Board of Directors. "We're thrilled that the ministry will be able to continue."

The Sisters of Notre Dame have taught generations of students in South Boston since the Civil War era, eventually at Cardinal Cushing High School on West Broadway. After the high school closed in 1992, they promptly opened the Notre Dame Education Center, which focuses on literacy, workforce development and college prep classes for adults, and high-school equivalency classes. The center serves as many as 700 students a year and moved to its current location in 2008.



Students in the Urban Sociology class at Notre Dame Education Center in South Boston worked on an assignment last month.

So when their development proposal encountered the expected opposition from some neighbors over parking and size issues, the sisters were able to draw on their deep relationships in the community. For example, the number of people who told the Boston Planning & Development Agency that they supported the project was nearly double the number of critics who formally opposed it. Many supporters cited the sisters' work in the community.

Many, of course, remembered the nuns who taught them or their kids.

Pauline Edmonds has a 40-year-old daughter who graduated from Cardinal Cushing and a 26-year-old daughter who received her high school degree through Notre Dame's diploma program. The younger daughter is now training to be a doctor at the UMass Medical School in Worcester.

“It was more than a high school diploma,” said Edmonds, a retired nurse and lawyer who volunteers at the school. “They gave her back her confidence. They took a high school dropout and enabled her to do what she’s now doing.”

Without the new building, Edmonds added, the Sisters of Notre Dame “won’t survive” in the neighborhood.

That kind of support helped the project win a key approval from the Zoning Board of Appeal in August. The sisters’s development partners, Enda Madigan and Patrick Mahoney, had scaled back the project to 49 apartments, from an initial proposal of 55, in an effort to appease neighbors.

While Old Colony Avenue has long been an industrial strip, it abuts a residential neighborhood of narrow streets with many single-family homes, and the apartment building would be among the largest around.

“We got steamrolled,” said one opponent of the project, Michael Pickup, a longtime neighbor. “I don’t think anybody had a problem with the school. It’s just the size of the building. . . . It’s just too big, too dense.”

The road to a new home began about two years ago, when the sisters learned their building was for sale. Their lease gave the sisters first crack on a potential purchase. That set off a scramble that resulted in Notre Dame’s pulling together \$2.2 million for a down payment — without having a development plan in place.

Notre Dame worked with First Commons Bank, later acquired by Brookline Bank, to pull off the deal. But the bank essentially required the school to make a



The Notre Dame Education Center is redeveloping its property. Above are executive director Mary Rose Durante and developer Patrick Mahoney.

down payment of 50 percent.

“Their concern was that we’re a nonprofit,” said Mary Rose Durante, the school’s executive director. “Obviously, we operate at a loss every year. They would never want to have to foreclose on our nuns . . . [so] they were very cautious, in terms of what we could borrow.”

The bankers put Durante’s group in touch with several local developers; the sisters were looking for a team that could put together a residential project that would both repay the order for the down payment and ensure the school would remain in the neighborhood. They settled on Madigan and Mahoney, whose firm All Saints Development LLC will officially acquire the property next year, once all the designs are done and permits are in hand.

The plan is to find a temporary home for at least six classrooms for two years, beginning in August, until the new building is ready. Durante said she hopes to stay in South Boston during that interim period, but recognizes that it could be difficult.

After all, Southie’s real estate isn’t getting any cheaper. The right of first refusal was included in the nuns’ lease in 2008. Durante said she doubts the nuns at the time ever envisioned exercising it some day.

“We did this thinking we really can’t afford to do this,” Durante said. “But we looked around and there really was no other place for us to go, certainly nothing we could find in South Boston.”

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