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Roxbury

Controversial Developer Plans to Convert Historic Roxbury Church into Condos

Councilor Tito Jackson called the project 'out-of-touch, out-of-scale, and outrageous.'

By Kyle Scott Claus | Boston Daily | August 19, 2016, 11:58 a.m.



A Brighton realtor's plans to redevelop a historic church in the Highland Park neighborhood of Roxbury into condominiums has some community members seething.

At a neighborhood meeting last week, representatives from City Realty presented a proposal to convert St. James African Orthodox Church at 50 Cedar Street into 30 units of housing, along with nine additional units at 56 Cedar Street. The parcel is located within a subdistrict currently zoned for three-family residences.

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“At this point, we’re really early in the design process and don’t yet have any plans to share,” said Josh Fetterman of City Realty in an email. “Last week’s meeting was a preliminary meeting to introduce ourselves to the neighborhood, let them know of our intention to develop the site, and listen to their thoughts on the best use of the site. We know this area and this property in particular has a deep history so we are working hard to find the best way to incorporate that history into any future building.”

However, an attendee of the meeting provided *Boston* with a copy of the tentative plans presented to the neighborhood.

Designed by Dorchester’s Roache Christopher Architecture—the firm founded by the city’s Inspectional Services Division commissioner William “Buddy” Christopher and now run by his son James—the five-story project calls for the church’s stained glass and elements of the interior to be incorporated into the new design. It includes 32 parking spaces, as well as an electric vehicle charging station and roof deck.

“City Realty’s Cedar Street proposal is out-of-touch, out-of-scale, and outrageous for the neighborhood in which they are proposing this project,” says City Councilor Tito Jackson, whose district includes Highland Park. “The scale, and also the architecture involved in this project, simply do not fit the neighborhood and community this is being proposed in.”

Many of City Realty’s hundreds of properties across the city were purchased after foreclosure. Tenants have complained of predatory rent hikes, no-fault evictions, and poor maintenance.

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Speaking in favor of the project was former state senator Dianne Wilkerson. Since her FBI arrest for taking bribes and subsequent release from federal prison in 2013, the state’s first African American female senator has been a vocal critic of gentrification in Roxbury. One attendee at the neighborhood meeting said Wilkerson acknowledged City Realty’s unsavory reputation, but urged residents to give the developer a chance.

Wilkerson could not be reached for comment Thursday.

The St. James site is located adjacent to the historic Cedar Street marble row houses, built in a popular French style to attract developers to the Roxbury Highlands in 1871. Roughly a century later, the dilapidated row houses were converted into affordable housing. Greg Galer, executive director of the Boston Preservation Alliance, says the organization has heard concern over the St. James project, and plans to examine further.

“We are in no way against development, but to have a windfall, highly dense, downtown-like project in a beautiful, tight-knit, well-connected neighborhood is absolutely unacceptable,” Jackson says. “In addition, this organization has a history of complaints, as well as many tenants who have come to my office, complained to my office about the treatment that they received from City Realty.”

Jackson and City Realty managing partners Fred Starikov and Steve Whalen had previously sparred over the developer’s activities in his district. “You have said you’re building up Roxbury, but you’re not building the type of Roxbury I want to see,” Jackson told them in a 2014 hearing. “You bought distressed units, and you have put a lot of residents in distress.”

Whalen testified that City Realty wished be a true community partner, a statement Councilor-at-Large Ayanna Pressley called “smug and duplicitous.” A year earlier, a *Metro Boston* photographer captured a City Realty employee giving the middle finger to tenants protesting rent spikes and no-



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fault evictions outside their Cleveland Circle offices. The real estate broker later claimed he was prompted by a racial comment.

This summer, a *Globe* investigation discovered that Starikov had signed a \$3.8 million agreement to purchase several triple-deckers near Bartlett Yard, which connects Fort Hill to Dudley Square, from real estate dealer Rolando Pam. A City Realty representative later told the *Globe* it will no longer conduct business with Pam and does not condone his practices, which have sparked investigations by the Attorney General and District Attorney.

Built in 1910, St. James had a troubled recent past before it sold for \$1 million last year. In 1991, Maude Hinds, the 87-year-old sister of Barbados-born church co-founder Rev. James Greenidge, was strangled inside her apartment on Clifford Street. She was eulogized at St. James.

In 1999, police arrested Rev. Felipe Texera, a young priest at St. James known for his outreach work with Cape Verdean youths, for refusing to move his car, which was blocking the roadway, while breaking up a fight. The arrest sparked backlash from religious leaders, who alleged police misconduct and racial harassment. In 2006, a man was shot in the passenger seat of a Ford Taurus and critically wounded at the intersection of Cedar Street and Hawthorne Street, in front of St. James.

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