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How a rural Mass. town finally got its first multifamily housing project in 25 years

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Baldwinville School Apartments

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Like the rest of Massachusetts, in Templeton, housing and especially affordable housing is hard to come by. The rural town of less than 9,000 people hasn't seen a new multifamily housing project in 25 years.

Now, a former school building is expected to offer a reprieve in the form of 54 mixed-income apartments.

Two Massachusetts-based development companies are working together to construct the Baldwinville School Apartments in the 1923 school building at 16 School St., which closed for good in 2019. Of the 54 units, 49 will be income-restricted at 30 to 60% or less of the area median income, which in Templeton in 2023 is \$89,200 for a household of two, according to the [Massachusetts Housing Partnership](#).

"We want to make sure that not only are we looking to the future and spending our money appropriately and smartly, but we want to use the money that was spent prior for good use," said Select Board Chairman Mike Currie Wednesday at an event where the developers walked members of the community through the building and explained their plans for the property. "If it's not a school anymore, it's going to have another life."

The three-story, 23,500-square-foot structure that would eventually become the Baldwinville Elementary School was originally built as a high school and opened in 1923. A previous school building had been destroyed in a fire in 1921.

In February 2019, as Templeton prepared for the permanent closure of the school, the town released a request for proposals to redevelop the property. The goals of the RFP were to enhance the economic climate of the town, eliminate the blight from the decaying structure, and preserve the historic character of the building.



Inside the former Baldwinville School in Templeton, which will be redeveloped into apartments. (Tréa Lavery, MassLive)

At the time, only one submission was received in response to the RFP, proposing to purchase the property for \$500,000 for use as a cannabis cultivation facility. While the town approved the proposal at the time, the project eventually fell through before the sale was completed, and the RFP was re-released in 2020.

This time, Templeton received two proposals: another for a cannabis facility from a different company, and one for an affordable residential development from Milton-based MPZ Development and Newton-based Capstone Communities.

- **Read more:** [Mass. residents' views on rent control shift based on questions, poll shows](#)

The town went with the residential project, which went along with its Master Plan completed in 2017, which listed goals of increasing its housing stock.

According to data from the state [Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities](#), Templeton has a subsidized housing inventory of 7.7%, a number which measures its low- and moderate-income housing compared to the total number of housing units. (This number is based on the 2010 U.S. Census, and numbers from the most recent Census are not yet available.) “By some estimates, Massachusetts is as much as 200,000 units behind in what we need for housing for our population and to continue the growth that we want to see in the state. You might be saying, ‘Well, this is 50 units. That’s a drop in the bucket,’” said State Rep. Jon Zlotnik at Wednesday’s event. “But it’s going to be the world to the people who are able to live here.”

Templeton has not been able to create more housing in recent years because it simply hasn’t had enough funding, according to Currie. He gave the example of Day Mill Townhouses, a condominium community that they have been trying to keep affordable.

“That’s some of our only affordable housing. As people move out and things change, we get the right of first refusal, but we don’t have the resources,” he said. “We’re a small town. In the early 2000s, we were fiscally struggling, but in the last five years we’ve gotten more resources.”

The difficulty is not unique to Templeton: other rural towns in the area are also struggling to meet their housing goals. Neighboring Winchendon has an SHI of 8%, Hubbardston has 3%, and Royalston and Philipston each have less than 1%.

“In rural communities, we have unique challenges,” Zlotnik said. “But we also have unique opportunities, like the one that we’re standing here before today.”

Zlotnik said his father had attended the Baldwinville School in fifth and sixth grade, and that as he watched the school be converted into housing, he was happy to also see his own elementary school in Gardner going through the same process.



Renderings of the future Baldwinville School P

The Baldwinville School Apartments will consist of four studio, 15 one-bedroom, 29 two-bedroom and six three-bedroom apartments ranging from 600 to 1,200 square feet, with 15 units in the main school building and the remaining 39 in an addition behind it. The new building will be designed to mimic the look of the historic school.

Mathieu Zahler, principal of MPZ Development, said the project team wants to keep a lot of the elements of the building that will remind residents of its history. The exterior will be restored, including returning the original “Templeton High School” sign, and interior elements like blackboards will be retained.

“All of the common areas that you see will remain will be preserved,” Zahler said. “You’ll come in here and you’ll be like, ‘This is a school.’ And then you’ll go into one of the units and [realize] people live here now.”

To complete the project, the developers have entered into an agreement to also purchase 12 School St., for a total of 2.6 acres. The exterior of the property will include a walking path open to the community, a playground and terrace for residents, as well as a parking lot with 76 spaces.

Inside, resident amenities will include a basement fitness center in what was the school gymnasium and laundry facilities on each floor, in addition to a management office.

Jason Korb, principal of Capstone Communities, said he and the other developers plan to stick around to make sure the development remains a good place for residents to live.

“We’re not a turn-and-flip developer. The financing programs that we are required to use here require us to own the project once it’s open for at least 15 years,” Korb said. “When you think about selecting materials and making decisions, we’re not just thinking about today. We’re not thinking about just two years from now. We’re thinking about 15 years from now, 20 years from now.”



Inside the former Baldwinville School in Templeton, which will be redeveloped into apartments. (Tréa Lavery, MassLive)

The project has already been fully permitted by the town, but before construction can start, however, the project needs financing. The original project estimate was \$20 million, but as inflation drives up prices, the current number is closer to \$30 million.

In that time, MPZ and Capstone have applied for highly sought-after funding from the state, but did not receive it in the previous funding round. They are currently preparing to apply again.

The town has already committed \$1.174 million in Community Preservation Act funds, and are in discussions to contribute another \$750,000 or so in CPA money. The project is also the first one in Templeton to receive state or historic preservation tax credits.

If the developers receive funding, Korb said construction would start in the spring of 2024, and the building would officially open as soon as the end of 2025.

“Once we get a project like this, the community is going to realize more jobs, our school funding is going to be more sustainable,” Currie said. “It’ll revitalize the community.”

Learn more about the Baldwinville School Apartments at the project [website](#).