

# 110-year-old school finds new life as affordable apartment complex in Bridgewater

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McElwain School Apartments

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A school building built in 1912 in Bridgewater is now a home to 57 households.

The McElwain School Apartments officially opened Tuesday in the former elementary school building, which had previously been vacant since 1994. In addition to preserving the historic building, however, the developers were able to build an additional, brand-new apartment building on the property, allowing the town to add 51 income-restricted units to its housing stock.

“There are people who go to work every day in this town or in the neighboring communities. They work full time. They work in the retail establishments, they pour coffee, they pour beer for a living, and they need a safe, affordable place to live,” said Ed Augustus, secretary of the Massachusetts Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities, at the grand opening event. “This project helps accomplish that.”

The project began in 2016, when the town of Bridgewater began discussions of what to do with the former McElwain School, according to Town Manager Michael Dutton. The following year, they put out a request for proposals, with the intention of entertaining any suggestion for a use for the building.

They received only one submission: Newton-based Capstone Communities and Milton-based MPZ Development wanted to build a mixed-income community, preserving the original building and honoring the school’s history.

“The McElwain School Apartments is a very special place. We’ve taken a community asset and reinvigorated it once again,” said Mathieu Zahler, principal of MPZ Development. “There are so many great memories here and stories about the McElwain, and through its renovation we’ve been able to preserve those memories and allow the new residents here to create their own. Its hallways and rooms are once again filled with children and families.”

The 3.6-acre complex includes the former school building, which holds 16 apartments; the new construction, which holds another 38, and a three-family house next to the school building which the developers purchased during the course of the project.

The new construction received the highest score in all of Massachusetts for its Passive House design, a construction standard for energy efficiency, according to Capstone Communities Principal Jason Korb. It is the 11th completed multifamily Passive House building in the state.

The development is made up of 13 one-bedroom, 36 two-bedroom and eight three-bedroom apartments. Fifty-one of the 57 units are affordable for families earning 60% of the area median income or less.

Residents began moving into the McElwain Apartments in January and the development is fully leased.

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The property offers onsite management and maintenance, a dog park, a playground which is open to the public, a community room, fitness room and pollinator garden.

In front of the original school building, a statue of a flying shoe by steampunk artist Bruce Rosenbaum pays homage to the legacy of William McElwain, the founder of the McElwain Shoe Company. The shoe manufacturer was a major employer in Bridgewater at the beginning of the 20th century, and McElwain's family donated the land the school was built on.

"This brings the William McElwain School full circle," Dutton said. "The school was designed to fill an educational need for the children of the town's factory workers. Today, it provides housing to a growing number of people who find it more and more difficult to find housing and who work in our community."

Town Council President Erik Moore, who attended the McElwain School from first through fourth grade, said the project was an example of the future vision for Bridgewater, which includes creating more affordable housing, improving transit and improving green spaces.

"I have memories in this building fostering relationships. It provided a sense of community to our youth. It exposed me and many others to new ideas and new ways of thinking, and it prepared many in our town for the future," he said. "This important building has the opportunity to do all of that stuff all over again. It can create community, it can expose us to new ideas and it can certainly prepare us for the future."

The project cost a total of \$29.2 million and was financed in part by \$1.345 million from the town's Community Preservation Fund, the first use of Community Preservation funds for affordable housing in Bridgewater. In addition, the developers received \$6.4 million in loans from the Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities, a \$15 million construction bridge loan from The Life Initiative, a \$5.3 million loan from the Massachusetts Housing Partnership and other loans and tax credits.