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Boston awards grant to HBI for Roxbury church

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Roxbury, MA Mayor Marty Walsh, the City's Community Preservation Committee and the Boston City Council have awarded \$500,000 to the nonprofit Historic Boston Inc. for acquisition and redevelopment of the historic St. James African Orthodox Church in Roxbury as affordable housing and neighborhood workspace.

The \$500,000 in CPA funds are among the first grants secured by HBI to support the St. James project, which currently has a funding gap of about \$3 million.

The grant to Historic Boston Inc. for the St. James Church work was one of 56 projects that mayor Walsh recommended for a total of more than \$34 million in Community Preservation Act funding. The recommendations went before the Boston City Council for its review and were approved this month.

In announcing the grants earlier this month, mayor Walsh said, "I am proud to recommend these proposals for funding approval, which will support our community in countless ways. Since residents voted to adopt the Community Preservation Act two years ago, we have awarded CPA funding for projects in every neighborhood. We look forward to continuing to use this revenue to build on our work related to affordable housing, historic preservation and open space."

Historic Boston Inc., which is working with the Roxbury neighborhood to plan and design the historic structure's re-use and new housing on adjoining open space, has engaged the eminent architectural firm Hacin + Associates of Boston for the project.

Hacin + Associates is a multi-disciplinary architecture and design firm dedicated to design excellence and client service with a focus on the sensitive development of historic neighborhoods. H+A's clients include Project Place, the Tent City Corp., Lawrence Community Works, Boston Global Investors, Berkeley Investments, The Hamilton Companies, Related Beal, and WS Development.

"We're very excited to be working with HBI on returning this landmark structure back to life on this critical site in the heart of the Highland Park neighborhood," said David Hacin FAIA, president of Hacin + Associates.

Last fall, Historic Boston Inc. completed acquisition of church, which was built in 1910, and HBI is continuing to work with the Highland Park neighborhood to determine specific new uses for the 50

Cedar St. property. HBI paid Bookline-based City Realty Group \$1.4 million for the building and land.

“We are grateful to The Life Initiative, a community investment fund created by Massachusetts-based life insurance companies, for financing the acquisition and for their confidence in HBI,” said Kathy Kottaridis, executive director of Historic Boston.

HBI will undertake a full rehabilitation of the building and restore the grandeur of the two-story sanctuary space.

HBI's first step was to stabilize the building for a period of two years as rehabilitation is being planned in order to arrest the rapid deterioration that the building has suffered from over the last three years. Work began immediately to make the building weather tight for the winter.

Consistent with its rehabilitation and development goals, HBI is working with the Highland Park Neighborhood Coalition to create a mixed-use plan for the site that creates housing in form of both new home ownership units and affordable rental housing, as well as work spaces with community access in the church's sanctuary.

The historic building was built for a Norwegian immigrant community in the early 20th century and was sold in 1955 to St. James African Orthodox Church, a congregation of Caribbean immigrants and faith strongly associated with the followers of black activist Marcus Garvey. Through community mobilization and an injunction filed by mayor Walsh, the property was permanently protected this year as a Boston Landmark, preventing its impending demolition.

The property includes an existing church building measuring 8,000 s/f and a parking lot of approximately 9,000 s/f.

The construction of new housing on the parking lot portion of the site would help finance the cost of restoring the historic building.

The church is in distressed condition, having been neglected for years. HBI is planning a \$5.5 million adaptive reuse effort, tentatively as a co-working space for area entrepreneurs and artists in the church's sanctuary, with affordable housing units on the church's ground level.

The fundraising need for this project is estimated to be \$3 million for the church. The Kuehn Foundation and the Harold Whitworth Pierce Charitable Trust have already awarded grants to HBI to support due diligence and project planning.

The stained-glass windows in the church are from the Norwegian period, as is the essential design and decoration of the church. The property will provide an opportunity for historic interpretation of a community in Roxbury that is little known to much of the neighborhood today.

The St. James African Orthodox Church is listed on the National Register of Historic Places as a

contributing building with in the Highland Park National Register District. It is a Boston Landmark for its associations with two phases of immigration to Boston and for its associations with 20th century civil rights and social justice.

According to a Boston Landmarks Commission study, the church was designed by Boston architect Edward Thomas Patrick Graham and is a blend of Shingle and Late Gothic Revival architectural styles. The building is 2 ½ stories tall with a tower.

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