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Arch Communities and WinnDev. begin adaptive reuse of Wells School

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Southbridge, MA According to Arch Communities and WinnDevelopment, construction is underway on a \$25.7 million adaptive reuse project to transform a 104-year-old school building into 62 apartments for seniors age 55 and older.

Of the 62 apartments, 56 of the units will provide affordable housing at rents set at 60 percent of Area Median Income (AMI), including eight apartments reserved for residents at or below 30% of the AMI. Six apartments will be available at market-rate rents. Six apartments will be customized for handicapped and sensory-impaired households.

“This is such a challenging time, particularly for our seniors who have been impacted significantly over the last year, and we’re thrilled to be providing this much needed safe and affordable housing for the Southbridge community,” said Arch Communities principal Richard Relich. “We’re extremely fortunate to work with our key partners who continue to support our efforts with critical funding including governor Baker and lieutenant governor Polito, secretary of state William Galvin and the staff at the Massachusetts Historical Commission, as well as our valuable partners at the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development, MassHousing, CEDAC, BlueHub Capital and The Massachusetts Housing Partnership. I would also like to acknowledge our equity partner, Bank of America, who continues to make critical investments in communities across Massachusetts, including at the Wells School Apartments where Bank of America purchased all of the tax credits available and provided construction financing for the project. Without the support from our partners, redeveloping historic properties such as the Wells School into mixed-income housing wouldn’t be possible,” Relich said.

The support of U.S. representative Richard Neal, whose district includes Southbridge, along with state senator Ryan Fattman and state representative Michael Durant, also helped pave the way for the project’s financing and approval.

“Adaptive reuse projects like the Wells School hold a special place among all of the development work we do,” said WinnDevelopment executive vice president Adam Stein. “We’re proud to have the opportunity to restore this historic landmark and return it to service on behalf of the community.”

The Mary E. Wells school was built in 1916 as the first public high school in Southbridge and

operated continuously for nearly a century.

As the town's population increased, fueled by the growth of the American Optical Company headquartered down the road, a new high school was built. In 1960s, the Wells building began being used as the town's junior high school. The building has been vacant since 2012. The three-story school, 90,000-square-foot building was named for the wife of the co-founder and president of the American Optical. Mary E. Wells became the first woman elected to public office in Southbridge when voters chose her to serve on the town's Board of Education in the 1890s.

"We are excited to have this project come to Southbridge," said Southbridge Town Manager Michael F. McCall. "Not only does this project breathe new life into a historic school that has been an important fixture in the community over 100 years, it affords our seniors an opportunity to downsize and remain in the community they call home. Additionally, we see the project as the beginning of a revitalization initiative that will spur further economic development and yield economic benefits to our community. "

Added Southbridge Town Councilor David Adams: "I am excited to see this historical building within our community, that means so much to so many, redeveloped while bringing with it new economic growth and much needed private senior housing,"

The project is utilizing both federal and state historic credits, along with federal and state low-income housing tax credits (LIHTC). The Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD) is providing the federal and state LIHTC, while the U.S. National Park Service and Massachusetts Historical Commission are providing the federal and state historic credits. In addition to purchasing all tax credits, the Bank of America is providing a construction loan for the project. Additional funding is being provided by The Massachusetts Housing Partnership (MHP) and the Community Economic Development Assistance Corporation (CEDAC).

"The Wells School project will transform a vacant school building into a thriving community for senior residents in the town of Southbridge," said Miceal Chamberlain, Massachusetts Market President for Bank of America. "Everyone deserves to have safe and affordable housing. We look forward to the opening of this community in the spring of 2022."

The adaptive reuse effort is expected to be completed by March 2022 with Keith Construction serving as the general contractor and The Architectural Team serving as the architect. The project has been designed to achieve the Enterprise Green Communities certification – the leading U.S. standard for the design, construction, and operation of healthy, energy efficient and environmentally responsible affordable housing. WinnResidential will provide Property Management services to the property.

"We have a long history of supporting WinnDevelopment and Arch Communities, and many of our loans have supported the hard work of turning historic mills or schools into housing," said MHP

Executive Director Clark Ziegler. “These aren’t easy developments to do, but WinnDevelopment and Arch Communities are experienced at making these types of projects come true and we’re pleased to support their partnership in transforming Southbridge’s Mary E. Wells School into mixed-income senior housing that will serve the community for years to come.”

Once completed, the Wells School Apartments will feature a substantial amenity package, including an in-building laundry, fitness & yoga studio, tenant lounge, activity room, movie room, play space, a game room, library and work pods, a wellness suite, storage, and an internal courtyard. The property will include 66 parking spaces, of which four will be accessible. In partnership with WinnResidential, Tri-Valley Elder Services will provide a support services program available to residents living at Wells School Apartments.

Adaptive reuse techniques will preserve the historic features of the building, which was designed by Peabody and Stearns, one of the premier architectural firms in the eastern United States during the late 19th century and early 20th century. WinnDevelopment has completed more than three dozen historic adaptive reuse projects in five states and the District of Columbia. The company has won more awards for transforming vacant schools, mills and other historic buildings into multifamily housing than any other developer in the United States.

Nominated for the National Historic Register in March 2017, the property is located at 80 Marcy Street in downtown Southbridge, a central Massachusetts town along the Connecticut border. Local transportation, services, shopping and amenities are within walking distance from the property. The site is also within close proximity to Harrington Hospital and the public bus route.