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IREM President's message: From empty offices to affordable housing

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Chris Salamanis-Rivera

Combine an excess of vacant office buildings with the need for increased multi-family affordable housing and it seems obvious that repurposing existing workforce spaces could be the solution to addressing the respective surplus and shortage. But like all things that elicit a “eureka” moment, it comes down to the pros and cons.

There are several benefits, including the cost and time efficiency of utilizing existing buildings rather than constructing residential housing from the ground up. Also, converting office buildings into housing is a way to revitalize urban areas that since COVID have experienced economic trials in the absence of foot traffic consumers. Then, there’s the benefit to the environment since the reuse of vacant office structures reduces the ecological impact of demolition and new construction.

Now for the challenges, topped by zoning and building code changes that might be required to accommodate residential use. Other roadblocks include the major interior remodeling needed to meet residential housing standards, such as the addition of kitchens, bathrooms, individual heating controls, and appropriate lighting. The potential high cost of conversion cannot be overlooked but could be tempered by governmental incentives.

Yet, despite the challenges, the need for additional multi-family remains great, a necessity that Boston Mayor Michelle Wu is well aware of having announced a pilot program in July of 2023 that offers developers substantial tax breaks for converting office buildings into residential housing.

There is no question that the shortage of affordable and available housing in the greater Boston area and throughout New England is a weighty matter. Zoning reforms, incentives for developers, and public-private partnerships are some of the strategies to address this scarcity, but the door should be left open for innovative solutions, including the repurposing of office buildings into residential units.

IREM celebrated Unity Day with residents, city of Boston officials, the Boston Housing Authority administrator and representatives on a beautiful summer day in August. A shout out of thanks to Kimberly Parker 2024 DEI IREM Boston Chapter chairperson for participating on behalf of IREM Boston Metropolitan Chapter No 4. Photos from the event are below.

Chris Salamanis-Rivera is the 2024 IREM Boston Chapter president and Vice President of Learning and Development at Beacon Communities, Lynn, Mass.

Shown (from left) are: A resident; Kevin McMaster of Boston Ice Cream Events; Mercy Robinson, executive director at South Boston En Accion; Kimberly Parker, 2024 DEI IREM Boston Chapter chair; Boston City Councilor Ed Flynn and a resident.

Shown are Kimberly Parker, 2024 DEI IREM Boston Chapter chair and Mercy Robinson, executive director at South Boston En Accion with BHA police officers.

Shown (from left) are: Manuel Andrades, maintenance supervisor; Lydia Polaski, City of Boston neighborhood liaison; and Kimberly Parker, 2024 DEI IREM Boston Chapter chair.

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