

Cambridge's 'nonprofit row' saved, but affordable space remains an issue for others

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As more nonprofits are pushed out of Greater Boston by rising rent and real estate costs, the Cambridge Redevelopment Authority is taking action to guarantee a home for 11 local organizations on “nonprofit row.” But while the fate of these organizations is secure for now, local leaders say more must be done to help safeguard the city’s other nonprofits, which face bleak prospects when it comes to affordable office space.

Earlier this month, the CRA finalized the \$8.8 million purchase of 93-99 Bishop Allen Drive, with the intention of keeping the property affordable for its current tenants. The CRA is also planning an almost \$2 million renovation slated to begin next year and intends to make the building into a shared space for nonprofits known as a nonprofit center.

“We’ve been at the center of this transaction,” CRA Executive Director Tom Evans said. “But the reason why this transaction is important is because of the work [the nonprofits] do for the community directly.”

The deal comes after one of 93 Bishop’s tenants, the Cambridge Community Foundation, pushed for the CRA to step in as a buyer after the previous owner, Enroot, put the building on the market in March.

Several tenants of Bishop Allen Drive said the purchase will allow them to serve the community as usual, without endangering the services they offer.

The Boston Area Rape Crisis Center is headquartered at 93 Bishop, known colloquially as nonprofit row. BARCC Executive Director Gina Scaramella said her organization is the building's largest tenant, occupying about 40 percent of the building.

BARCC offers counseling services, legal assistance and other forms of support to people dealing with sexual assault. She said clients need to be able to access BARCC's offices discreetly, often on short notice. The location makes that possible.

"[Our clients] might need to come right after work. They might need to come in their lunch hour. They might need to come before work or before school, between classes," she said. "And so having a location that makes it possible for people to get in and out is really important. Additionally, in terms of attracting staff and getting the support of volunteers having accessibility to the T is just critical."

'Bleak' prospects in available space for nonprofits

Scaramella said a search for a secondary location a few years ago demonstrated how difficult finding affordable space for nonprofits is at the moment.

"We had looked to open a new satellite office a couple of years ago, and it took us a very long time to find affordable space that was also handicapped accessible, and was close to public transportation at our price point," she said. "So it is incredibly difficult."

Sharon Zimmerman, executive director of Cambridge Camping, echoed that sentiment. She said a preliminary search for office space made after Enroot announced the sale demonstrated bleak prospects for office space elsewhere.

“It was anxiety provoking,” she said.

She also said it would have been unlikely the organization would have been able to remain in Cambridge if a new buyer decided to raise rent on the space.

CCF: Community needs to help safeguard nonprofits

Even with the future of 93 Bishop cemented, questions linger as to how to keep nonprofits in the city as costs continue to climb.

Green Street Studios, a nonprofit arts and dance studio located in Central Square, announced it would be closing by the end of October due to a rent hike.

“Tragically, the increase reflects the prohibitive cost to operate in the Central Square Cultural Arts District and broader Cambridge,” Green Street said in a statement on its website.

Across the river, nonprofits in Boston including Big Brothers Big Sisters of Massachusetts Bay have been forced to relocate due to rising costs as well, according to an April report from the Boston Globe.

Geeta Pradhan, CCF’s president and chief executive officer, said the displacement is a function of the pressures being put on Cambridge by the growing innovation economy, and nonprofits in the city are ill-equipped to deal with it.

“I think nonprofits are particularly vulnerable because they’re always on a shoe-string budget,” she said. “They’re putting out more than they bring in.”

Pradhan thinks the community should consider various options meant to safeguard affordable property for nonprofits, including land trusts and the creation of more office space focused on serving nonprofits.

Evans of the CRA indicated that the search for solutions to the issue was still in the early stages.

He pointed to the creation of the Foundry, a community center planned for East Cambridge that would include nonprofit office spaces, as another example of what was being done.

He said the Link, a coworking space in Kendall Square that offers space to nonprofits focused on workforce development, fills a similar role.

“The first step is trying to figure out what improvements we’re going to make to this building, and what the tenants in this building need,” he said.