Blue Boards Build High Hopes for Berlin
ALUMNAE FIND NEW LIFE AND PURPOSE FOR A CHERISHED SCHOOL

Bright blue seems like an unusual choice to try to hide a town’s most prominent eyesore. But disguising the dilapidated condition of their alma mater was the last thing the former classmates of Berlin, New Hampshire’s Notre Dame High School wanted to do, so when it came time to board up the vacant building, they chose that conspicuous color. They knew that huge plywood panels painted in brilliant blue would serve as a constant reminder that the time for restoring the school—an icon of Berlin’s hopes for its future—had come.

Any successful architectural restoration requires a clear vision of a building’s future and its past. Set within the deep woods of northern New Hampshire and beside a precipitous drop of the Androscoggin River, Berlin was a powerhouse for pulp and paper during the early part of the twentieth century. However, the city’s long decline matched the fate of the paper industry, leaving Berlin with half of its former population and a crumbling infrastructure at odds with the spirit of the town’s industrious past.

No one knows the history of Berlin better than the town’s community development director, Pamela Laflamme. One of the greatest challenges of her job is to help the town make difficult decisions about which buildings to save and which ones to tear down. Given Notre Dame High School’s history, it’s remarkable that it didn’t become one of the latter. An arsonist’s fire destroyed the gymnasium years ago and left the site contaminated with lead and asbestos waste. Numerous efforts to develop the school over the past decade failed. But as Laflamme noted, “the dedication of the Notre Dame alumnae was directly responsible for the fact that the school still stands. Their determination to find a new purpose for the building that meant so much to them was instrumental in its survival.”

The former students organized and approached the New Hampshire Housing Finance Authority (NHHFA) with a request to fund Notre Dame’s restoration, but the agency denied the request when the project failed to score competitively against their other submissions. Then, when Chris Miller, NHHFA’s managing director of management...
There are few other jobs that fine-tune one’s work ethic as well as lobstering. According to Kevin Bunker, hauling hundreds of pounds of lobster on a cold boat from sunrise to sunset really teaches you the value of hard work. Bunker's experience working on his family's lobster boat helped prepare him with the diligence and persistence he needed to pursue a career in real estate development. He graduated from the Harvard University Graduate School of Design in 2007, with a Master in Urban Planning degree and a vision for collaborative development.

Along with seasoned developers Richard Berman and Jim Hatch, Bunker started Developers Collaborative (DC), a group of independent real estate developers based in Portland, Maine.

Berman ran a land architectural firm in Portland in the 1970s before shifting to real estate development in 1985. His reputation as a philanthropist and community supporter is well known in Portland and beyond.

Hatch, the third piece to the original DC puzzle, has more than two decades of experience in working with municipalities and non-profit groups to develop dozens of affordable housing projects. “He taught me all I know about affordable housing development,” said Bunker.

DC is not technically a company, but rather a loose association of like-minded independent developers that share office space—and ideas. The open plan design of DC's office space helps to foster collaboration, even when developers are working on different projects.

“We're always yelling back and forth,” said Bunker. “If someone isn’t involved with a project, we still benefit from each other’s wisdom. Plus, it’s more fun and we develop better projects.”

DC’s developers partner at the project level, rather than at the corporate level. This makes the process more flexible and fluid, allowing people with different assets and

Richard Berman and Kevin Bunker at their office in Portland, Maine.

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and development, went to a meeting to debrief the project’s supporters, things took a different turn.

Miller was surprised to find a much larger group than he anticipated waiting for him. It included not only Notre Dame alumnae, but members of the developer’s staff, as well as a number of Berlin town officials. Everyone in the room was galvanized by the vision of a restored Notre Dame and the potential impact its transformation could have on the entire Berlin community. They engaged in a candid conversation that led to a revelation about the project’s past: the original purpose for the building’s restoration was conceived as “service-enriched housing” for seniors—a facility that utilized the outside services of supporting agencies to tend to the needs of its residents.

The senior housing idea had been discarded because of the perception that the demands of such a specialized residence would make it unfeasible. According to Miller, the irony is that the abandoned vision for the project is exactly what made Notre Dame workable for NHHFA.

“Another local housing complex was already serving the needs of the area’s general low-income senior population,” said Miller, “but those requiring service-enriched housing represented an under-served sector of the Berlin community that we were only too happy to find a way to support.” That new mission became the foundation for “Notre Dame Service Enriched Housing,” a 33-unit complex of low-cost apartments for seniors.

Along with a change in purpose, however, came the need for a change in developers—and that change had to happen fast. A com-
INDUSTRY NEWS BRIEFS

2013 AMERICAN HOUSING SURVEY

In October, HUD released summary statistical data from its biennial American Housing Survey, which takes a deep look at the nation’s housing—everything from housing costs and quality, to types of plumbing and heating. The latest AHS includes new information about neighborhood social life and the use of public transportation.

http://1.usa.gov/11T1hhR

POINT-IN-TIME REPORT

The Point-In-Time (PIT) and Housing Inventory Counts (HIC), conducted in January 2014, were released at the end of the year. The report provides 2014 national, state, and Continuum of Care-level PIT and HIC estimates of homelessness, as well as which states appear to be experiencing the biggest increases and decreases in homelessness since 2007. Vermont has one of the biggest increases, while New Hampshire has one of the biggest decreases.

http://bit.ly/1yINffc

GROUNDBREAKING ACT CELEBRATES 40TH ANNIVERSARY

The Housing and Community Development Act of 1974 celebrated its 40th anniversary this year. The legislation made major changes to housing in the U.S., including the creation of the Section 8 programs, the Community Development Block Grant program, and the first federal Urban Homesteading program. The Act is also responsible for the now familiar term “very low income family,” (a family with income of 50% or less of the area median income).

http://bit.ly/1GaD8jG

Finding a way out of homelessness

Claflin found one of the most skillful practitioners in that group right under his own roof. More than $1M of the project’s funding came from historic tax credits. AHEAD’s Olivia Beleau had shepherded a dozen such rehabs to success by meeting the strict standards that historic tax credits require. As a Senior Project Manager, Beleau is responsible for focusing on the myriad tasks and details critical to earning historical status.

“These buildings are more than simple structures,” said Beleau. “They’re valuable antiques; every door knob and newel post must be carefully considered with an eye that is sensitive to both the style and intention of the building’s original construction.” Beleau’s work required the rare mix of talent and tenacity that has become the hallmark of the Notre Dame project.

What began as a bunch of blue plywood boards nailed to an abandoned school on a Berlin hill has become a beautiful new home for Berlin seniors, proof of just how far a committed core of classmates and citizens can go. Beleau revealed the way that passion inspired everyone who worked on Notre Dame: “So many people have invested their hearts in this project. Every one of us has worked to make their dream come true.”

community development block grant that made up a significant portion of the project’s funding was time sensitive, and if a qualified developer wasn’t found quickly, the grant money would disappear.

There was one developer uniquely suited to move the project ahead. Affordable Housing Education and Development (AHEAD) had a record of mastering the specific skills that matched Notre Dame’s needs. Executive Director Mike Claflin was well aware of the broad range of financial and construction services the job would require. With his long career in real estate, he was no stranger to the coordination of complex mixes of funding, but the low-income housing tax credits (LIHTC) that were critical to the project were new territory for him.

Luckily, the project team members he turned to for help shared the same cooperative style that sparked the project. “The staff of the Northern New England Housing Investment Fund was instrumental in educating me about the mechanics of the LIHTC program,” said Claflin. “It became clear to me that NNEHIF’s value was not only as syndicators of the credits, but as enthusiastic partners ready to help tackle a job requiring many specialized disciplines.”
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skills to partner on different things, said Bunker.

DC’s collaborative philosophy also extends to the communities in which they build and the stakeholders with whom they work. The developers work closely with municipalities in the early stages of planning, asking lots of questions about what the community needs and envisions for itself. Then, said Bunker, they sharpen their focus, make quick decisions, and move aggressively to get the job done.

Underpinning all of DC’s endeavors is the smart growth concept. This model for urban development revitalizes town centers and cities by building new residential and business space while capitalizing on the efficient use of existing public infrastructure. Bunker described it as “common sense applied to land use.”

“The idea is that housing ought to be near jobs, and vice versa—and both should be near community amenities like schools and public buildings,” he explained. “Density and mixing commercial and residential uses are key components.”

DC’s focus on compact and mixed-use development also helps reduce traffic by keeping car trips short and offering residents other practical options, such as walking, biking, or using public transit.

Although DC develops both affordable housing and market-rate properties (and sometimes a mix of both), they are always looking for ways that affordable housing can complement other uses and make for a better project overall.

After completing 22 projects throughout Maine—including affordable housing, market-rate, commercial, and mixed-use developments—Developers Collaborative is in a time of transition. While Berman and Hatch move purposefully toward retirement, Bunker has welcomed another developer—and two official DC staff members—into the fold. This was always the intention; it’s DC 2.0, the next generation, said Bunker.

Matt Teare is a developer who spent the last 13 years as the Director of Real Estate Development for John Wasileski and Seacoast Management. Teare is a partner on Osprey Circle in South Portland, as well as River Landing, a senior housing project in Topsham. The new 36-unit facility will be an affordable option for seniors, and while they haven’t officially started taking leases yet, there’s already a waiting list for its scheduled opening in summer, 2015.

Laura Reading joined DC as a project manager in 2013, after earning her Master of Urban Planning degree from the University of Michigan. Office manager Heather Lumb joined in 2014.

These additional team members have enabled Bunker to continue DC’s record of submitting more than one application for 9% tax credits per year. With Reading’s assistance, last year Bunker put in two applications. This year he put in four, as well as one 4% application.

As DC grows, Bunker is looking toward moving away from a developer-fee based model to building a portfolio through ownership: “I want it to be big enough so that we can do more, but I don’t want to grow so big that I just end up managing people instead of doing what I love, which is putting deals together.” Call it smart growth.