

Guest Column: One community; two visions

By **Richard Terrass**/ Guest Columnist
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The continuing controversy over the future use of the Our Lady of the Presentation School is about far more than the fate of one school and its students. It is a controversy over two distinctly different visions for the future of Oak Square and the larger Allston-Brighton community. It also should serve as a warning to other communities that the Archdiocese of Greater Boston cares little, if at all, about the needs and aspirations of those communities in its disposition of properties as the result of the reconfiguration.

It would be easy to dwell on the how much trouble the archdiocese's reconfiguration plan in general and the decision to close the Our Lady of the Presentation School in particular will have on our community. I prefer to look at the positive impact that the process of responding to this decision has had in Allston-Brighton.

Starting on the day last May when the archdiocese announced its intent to close the school, the community at large came out to support the children and parents. Working together over the last six months, the parents, community organizations and local businesses have crafted an innovative proposal that addresses the educational needs of local youth and families with programs ranging from preschool to adult education.


During this process, we have learned a great deal about the wide range of needs in our community. Our proposal, by addressing many of these needs, will help to stabilize and revitalize Oak Square and the Allston-Brighton community.


Oak Square, along with the rest of Allston-Brighton, is a community at risk. Between 1990 and 2000, poverty rates jumped a startling 14.7 percent. Twenty-three percent of Allston-Brighton residents live in poverty. The number of family households declined 6.5 percent to 32.7 percent, nearly 16 percent less than the citywide average of 48.1 percent. At the same time, owner occupancy rates declined to 19.3 percent compared to a citywide increase to 30.7 percent.


Allston-Brighton also has experienced a period of unprecedented university expansion and has become more diverse, with a 6.9 percent decrease in white (non-Hispanic) population and a 28.2 percent increase in Asian population. Sixteen percent of families in Allston-Brighton have children under the age of 6, yet a 2002 needs analysis shows that there are approximately 3.1 children for every full-time or part-time day-care slot. These changing demographics demonstrate the need for coordinated and expanded youth and family services in Allston-Brighton to support families, particularly recent immigrant families.


Working together in an open and inclusive process, parents, community organizations and local businesses, both large and small, crafted a vision for the future of our community that combined efforts of the YMCA, the Faneuil branch library and the OLP school to create a single Oak Square Community Campus. This would allow and encourage families to access coordinated comprehensive youth and family services. Among these services are affordable full-time, full-year preschool for children age 2 through 5; comprehensive and expanded YMCA after-school and summer camp programs; homework assistance and tutoring; a private, progressive, service-based elementary school which seeks to foster a commitment to civic engagement; adult education services, including literacy, ESL, GED and citizenship preparation programs with integrated child-care options; and intergenerational programs with local seniors.

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In contrast, the archdiocese has developed its plans in a secretive process that has excluded the community. Last March, archdiocese officials rejected efforts by Boston city planners to engage in a master planning process on the future of church properties in the city.

They met with parents only when faced with public protest and negative publicity. Parents were assured that no decision on the fate of the OLP building had been made. Parents were further led to believe that the financial needs of the archdiocese were paramount in its decision-making process.

Sadly, it has become obvious that the parents were misled as is evidenced by the three different statements released by the archdiocese in the week following its rejection of the community's proposal.

In exchange, the archdiocese offers the community a plan that furthers the encroachment of Boston College into our community, creates no new jobs and decreases the services available to support youth and families in Allston-Brighton. Our proposal goes well beyond any possible benefit that moving the Metropolitan Tribunal and other archdiocesan offices to Oak Square could offer and guarantees the archdiocese full market value for the school building.

We are confident that, as the editors of the TAB have said, the archdiocese "will find very few people who will be convinced that its plan for the OLP serves the people of A-B better than what the OLP parents saw in its vision for the property."

(Richard Terrass is an OLP parent and Presentation School Foundation board member. He lives in Brighton.)

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