

“The News and Values Around the Neighborhood”

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Health centers fret over BMC cuts

By PETE STIDMAN
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A number of Dorchester and Mattapan health centers, unions and advocacy groups have joined a citywide coalition called Put Patients First to urge the governor to halt funding cuts to the Boston Medical Center and the Cambridge Health Alliance.

The group's leading organization, political heavy-hitter SEIU Local 1199, recently rescheduled a rally planned for Jan. 15—the same day as Gov. Deval Patrick's State of the State address—to Jan. 29, after the presidential inauguration.

Some \$114 million has been cut from BMC's FY 2009 state payments all told, and the cuts are on track to jump to over \$220 million in FY 2010, according to hospital representatives. The hospital took drastic action last month, cutting



Teacher Jessica Viola, director Kathleen Sullivan, and dean of students Danielle Tata trade ideas for renovating an old Sydney Street organ factory that will become an extension of the Boston Collegiate Charter School. Photo by Pete Stidman

Charter school buys organ factory on Sydney St. for \$3.2m

By PETE STIDMAN
NEWS EDITOR

Fulfilling a long-held plan to expand its capacity, the Boston Collegiate Charter School acquired a second building just before Christmas last month.

The Boston Collegiate Charter Foundation bought the long-vacant former home of the Aeolian-Skinner Organ Company at 215 Sydney St. and a large shed nearby for \$3.2 million. The deal was financed with a \$6 million Qualified Zone Academy Bond that was purchased by Wainwright Bank & Trust.

“We're really excited that we could find something in walking distance,” said the school's executive director Kathleen Sullivan. “Right now it's really a shell so it'll be a matter of wiring it, heating it and putting up walls and things.”

Architects are just beginning to draw up plans and the work is set to start this spring.

When the school's roughly 200 fifth and sixth graders move in—sometime in the next year or two—the door will be open to expand the school's current population of 445 students to over 650. The growth will happen gradually, said Sullivan, as the larger fifth and sixth grade classes graduate Sydney Street and move through seventh to 12th grade at the school's 11 Mayhew St. location.

The state granted the school's charter in 1998, and first approved expansion in 2005, but it took years to plan and find space to grow, said Sullivan.

The biggest concern for those in the surrounding neighborhood, right next to the JFK/UMass Station on the Red Line, is likely to be traffic, said Deirdre Habershaw, president of the Columbia-Savin Hill Civic Association (CSHCA).

“I'm not sure how people are going to feel about it, but

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Charter school buys Sydney St. organ factory for \$3.2m

(Continued from page 1) I'm a little bit concerned as far as traffic," said Habershaw. "There's already some problems with park and rides around the T station."

Teachers taking a tour of the building on Monday said they'd be likely to take the T, and one asked if there would be a bike rack. A parking lot for faculty and visitors is planned for a lot across the street—which is now mostly occupied by a large white corrugated steel garage.

Another concern, said Habershaw, might come out of some raw feelings surrounding the history of the large billboard attached to the top of 215 Sydney.

That billboard was approved by the CSHCA in 2003 in exchange for a promise from New York City real estate

investor Albert Cohen, a partner at Centurion Realty, to put at least part of the building to "community use." The idea at the time was to put the Little House, a struggling health center, in the spot. But when the health center folded later on that plan dried up.

Dot Art used the space for a while, but were soon booted so renovations could be made to turn the place into "artist lofts." Then that work seemed to grind to a halt. Only part of the third floor showed signs of the work on Monday.

"It will be sort of a heated discussion when we talk about it," said Habershaw.

Mr. Cohen and Centurion Realty originally bought the building in 2000 for \$1.2 million, and it has sat empty for at least that long—its lack

of tenants a testament to the money that can be raked in with a well-placed billboard.

As part of the deal with BCC, the billboard will stay. It is now a legal easement on the property, and thus still owned by Centurion and fully out of the school's influence.

The building was originally built sometime around 1906 by Ernest M. Skinner, a builder of church organs. Through a merger, his self-named company eventually became the Aeolian-Skinner Organ Company. The company delivered organs to churches and halls all over the country, including the Boston Symphony Hall and the New York Metropolitan, and originated the "American Classic" organ, which according to a website dedicated



Teachers (l to r) Beth Friedman, Kristen Porter and Jamie Pinnell tour the old Ernest Spinelli piano factory on Sydney Street with director Kathleen Sullivan and director of development Joyce Kim McDonough. The long-vacant space will become a new extension for fifth and sixth graders attending the Boston Collegiate Charter School, headquartered on Mayhew Street. *Photo by Pete Stidman*

to the company "changed the course of organ building forever."

The company began to struggle in the 1960s, shortly after a few of its buildings were taken down by the Southeast Expressway in the late 50s and its quietly dignified "boss" and chief innovator G. Donald Harrison had died. According to the recorded recollections of 60s-era company president John Tyrrell, many of the older craftsmen were also retiring or passing away, shutting down whole departments.

By 1971 or 1972 the company folded, after a last-ditch effort to

regain its former size with a move to Randolph. Aeolian-Skinner left 215 Sydney St. for Randolph around 1968 or 1969, according to several accounts, but Tyrrell never forgot first coming to work there in 1952.

"The four-story building itself, like so many occupied by old-time companies, was a dusty and drafty loft building," read a transcript of a speech Tyrrell once made at the American Institute of Organbuilders. "I can still hear the clatter of the antiquated machinery, the slapping of the power belts driven from long rotating shafts, and the continuous whine of the

air humidifiers... Rows of workbenches lined the outside walls, under the windows, where the workers had the benefit of natural light. There was always the smell of hot glue, or orange shellac, or the pungency of acid used in the soldering of galvanized iron wind trunking. And in the mill in the basement, there was the special odor of freshly cut lumber: California sugar pine, red and white oaks, walnut, mahogany... In the distance you could hear the repeated squeals of pipes being voiced. Organ shops have an ambiance all their own."