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It's not a dorm, but school rules apply

at 1047 Commonwealth Ave., recently renovated as 180 apartments.



DAVID L RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

Christina Frawley helped her daughter Margaret move into temporary Boston University housing at 1047 Commonwealth Ave., recently renovated as 180 apartments.

By Tim Logan GLOBE STAFF SEPTEMBER 05, 2016

The new six-story building on Commonwealth Avenue wasn't built to be a dorm. But during the last week, 180 Boston University students have moved in.

The arrangement is part of a two-year deal BU made with the building's developer to lease out the space as student housing. It'll be like any other dorm, complete with RAs and university housing rules, while BU renovates its Myles Standish Hall in Kenmore Square. Once those upgrades are complete, the plan is for 1047 Commonwealth Ave. to go back on the city's rental market.

Emerson College is eyeing a similar deal in the Fenway while it renovates a dorm downtown. And Boston College this summer converted an apartment tower it owns in Brighton into a dorm, part of a plan to make up for student housing it's tearing down for a new recreation center.

Call it a side effect of Boston's student housing boom.

As schools get to work on the 3,500 new dorm rooms the Walsh Administration has approved in the last two years, construction is knocking some of their existing dorms out of commission. So they're cutting deals with developers and landlords to put students in regular apartments, for now at least.

It's a temporary fix, they promise, but one that has some housing advocates nervous in a city where the rental market is so tight that every apartment seems precious.

"This neighborhood doesn't need any more student housing," said Rich Giordano, a community organizer at the Fenway Community Development Corp., which is opposing Emerson's plan. "We'd much rather see that building used as mixed, open-market housing."

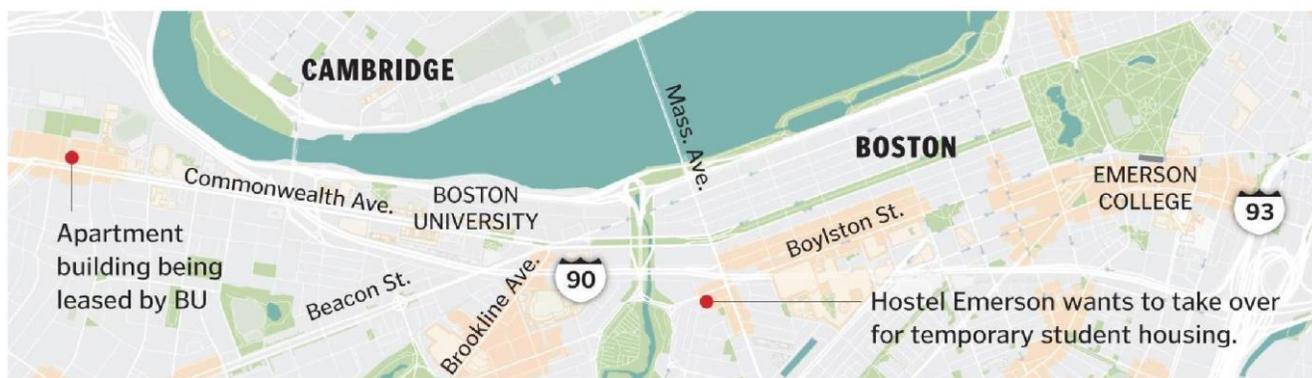
Off-campus student housing isn't unusual in one of the nation's biggest college towns. BU has long put students in hotels when its dorms overflow. A handful of schools rent a few dozen apartments here and there. But taking large buildings, whole, would be a new development.

At 1047 Commonwealth Ave., on the western edge of BU's campus in Allston, Cambridge-based developer Urban Spaces LLC just finished converting an old office building into 180 "micro-units" - 300- to 400-square-foot studios each with a full kitchen and hardwood floors. Their plan, said CEO Paul Ognibene, had been to market the apartments to graduate students, young professionals, and others who wanted a place in the city but couldn't quite afford new buildings downtown.

Then BU came calling.

The university needed a place to put students during the two-year update of Myles Standish Hall, and knew the Commonwealth Avenue building was set to open this summer.

"It dovetails nicely with our schedule and beginning the project at Myles Standish," said BU spokesman Colin Riley. "We can do construction on half the space there and house students who are displaced."



JAMES ABUNDIS/GLOBE STAFF

It works for the developer, too. Filling a new building with rent-paying tenants often takes a year or more. And every month apartments sit empty is money the developer never sees. But a university can rent the whole thing all at once.

"It's great swing space for them. And it's a great deal for us," Ognibene said on a recent tour. "This place is going to fill up immediately."

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Neither party would disclose how much BU is paying for the dorm, where students will hand over as much as \$17,160 to live for the school year. Riley called the deal “a win-win situation” for both the university and Urban Spaces. When the two years are up, there’s an option to extend for another two years.

“It’ll be interesting to see what happens after two years,” Ognibene said. “But our plan is to return it to market-rate housing.”

For some other projects, there’s fear the arrangement could become permanent.

Emerson College is asking the Boston Redevelopment Authority for permission to rent a 56-room building on Hemenway Street in the Fenway. It’s now a hostel, and Emerson would turn it into a dorm for two years while it renovates and expands its 748-bed Little Building residence hall downtown.

But Emerson’s plan faces pushback from neighbors who worry it could turn the building into a de facto dorm for good, taking another piece of the neighborhood essentially off the market.

“The Fenway is currently being squeezed in an economic vise, which is squeezing affordability and vibrancy from the neighborhood and driving out longtime residents,” 10 Fenway residents wrote in a recent letter to the BRA.

That’s not Emerson’s intent, said Peggy Ings, the college’s head of government and community relations. The college wants to uphold its housing commitments to the city, she said, and settled on the Hemenway building after more than a year of scoping out apartment buildings and hotels downtown.

“We’re not an institution that wants to turn our back on the city and our students and let these 115 kids go out on their own,” she said. “That’s not what we’re about.”

City officials say they’ll weigh the neighborhood concerns against the need for more student housing. Each case is a little different, said former BRA spokesman Nick Martin.

“It’s kind of a push and pull situation,” said Martin, in an interview before he recently left the BRA. “Generally we want schools housing more students on campus. But you can’t really do that without having places for students to live temporarily during construction.”

The key word is temporary, said Sheila Dillon, chief of housing for Mayor Martin J. Walsh and the point-person on his dorm push. As long as the schools’ deals with private buildings have an end date, she said, the city is generally OK with them.

“We have assurances that [1047 Commonwealth Ave.] goes back into apartments,” when the work on Myles Standish is done, she said. “That’s kind of an important piece of this.”

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