

Community

Charles River Center takes long view on former missile site



by **Bob Baker**

November 15, 2023

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Credit: Charles River Center

Tucked up the hill from the North Hill retirement community, the Charles River Center (CRC) lies on the storied parcel of Needham called East Militia Heights. The Paul D. Merritt Center is the central location for a program that oversees 28 group homes throughout the MetroWest area and offers a wide range of services for 400 adults with intellectual and developmental disabilities and for people on the autism spectrum.

Earlier this year, the center acquired 3.5 acres adjacent to its main campus. The parcel contained 13 single-story homes that have since been demolished in preparation for new construction. A small playground at the far end of the property and the short driveways of the homes are all that remain of this neighborhood that once housed army personnel and their families.

Charles River Center President and CEO Anne-Marie Bajwa said the plan is to build semi-independent housing for individuals on the autism spectrum. “There’s a huge unmet need for people who need intermittent supervision,” she said. “People who need help with things like banking or getting a job.”

Bajwa said the CRC is considering many design options including individual units, stand-alone houses with suites, and condo arrangements. “We haven’t landed on

anything yet.”

A community center that Needham residents will be able to access is also part of the design, and the CRC will host focus groups with the autism community to understand their preferences. “Whatever goes into that land has to fit our mission,” said Bajwa. “And we also know it’s going to be affordable housing.”

The state Department of Developmental Services will be the primary source of funding. It has already ruled out the construction of more group homes. Bajwa said the CRC is looking at more innovative models such as smart homes with the latest in assistive technologies. “We’re looking at this as an opportunity to do something that is very forward thinking,” she said. “It will be zero emission, of course.”



Credit: Charles River Center

This plan is a far cry from the simple 1950s ranch homes that were built to house soldiers working for the Nike Missile site whose command and control center was located on the land where CRC’s main building sits today. The missile silos were located next to Ridge Hill, where the dog park and community farm now pursue more peaceful undertakings.

The North Hill and Ridge Hill sites were part of what Boston Magazine dubbed the “ring of fire,” one of 11 missile installations that surrounded the metropolitan area and were built to protect residents from incoming Russian aircraft laden with nuclear weapons. At the time, experts knew they had little chance of succeeding. Luckily the fleet of Russian bombers never came. When the bombers were replaced with intercontinental missiles, the Nike site became obsolete. The army removed the missiles in 1959 and turned the site over to the National Guard. It was then used to house personnel from the Army’s Natick Labs.

The air defense base was supposed to have been a secret, but it was hard to hide in a small town. Gloria Greis, executive director of the Needham History Center and Museum, said the Nike site was the town’s best kept yet worst kept secret. “Everyone knew the military installation was there but they did their best not to have military personnel walking around town.”

It was Army policy to have its married soldiers fit seamlessly into suburban life in the 1950s, but there was a problem. Many of the personnel were African-American and couldn’t find homes in Needham to rent. “The army was notable for having been integrated more quickly than most American institutions,” Greis said. The East Militia Heights development was a response to Needham’s reluctance to house African-American men and their families.

The homes the Charles River Center envisions represent not only the U.S. economic shift from military to civilian priorities, but also a shift toward a greater

ECONOMIC SHIFT FROM MILITARY TO CIVILIAN PRIORITIES, BUT ALSO A SHIFT TOWARD A GREATER sense of inclusion.

The CRC won a competitive bidding process that included the Needham Housing Authority, North Hill and Babson College. “Having a chance to acquire this much open land is a very rare opportunity, especially in Needham,” said Bajwa.

Unlike many major construction projects in the area, this one doesn’t appear to have a lot of opposition. “North Hill is super supportive,” she said. “Some wanted to join our capital campaign, and some have become volunteers.”

Bajwa estimates that it will take at least four years to break ground on this project.

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