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# Boston offers a plan to help colleges add dorms

By **Matt Rocheleau**

| GLOBE CORRESPONDENT | OCTOBER 09, 2014



6 COMMENTS



BILL GREENE/GLOBE STAFF/FILE

**The student residence at 10 Buick Street at Boston University.**

Mayor Martin J. Walsh of Boston wants to cut in half the number of college students living off campus by 2030 and is calling on Boston colleges to collectively add 18,500 new dormitory beds to make that possible.

The plan, part of the mayor's new housing initiative, would encourage colleges to work with private developers to build the new facilities.

The proposal, greeted positively by officials at several colleges, comes amid increasing concern over shoddy, dangerous conditions common in off-campus student housing. The additional dorm space would give colleges greater oversight of students and ease the rapid growth of the student rental market in many neighborhoods.

Devin Quirk, director of operations at Boston's Department of Neighborhood Development, said the city would facilitate

partnerships between colleges and private developers to build new dorms, with one or more colleges agreeing to lease all or portions of the buildings.

Such agreements would save schools from having to put up large amounts of capital to construct the facilities, while giving developers a guarantee that the property would be rented. Privately developed dorms can also be taxed, unlike dorms built solely by colleges, which are classified as nonprofits, city officials said.

The cost to build 18,500 new dorm beds in Boston would exceed \$2.6 billion, according to the report. The city envisions 16,000 for undergraduates and 2,500 for graduate students.

Quirk said that during a pair of recent meetings with city leaders, local college presidents supported the ideas outlined in the report.

“The big change here is the commitment from the universities to work with us on this issue,” he said. “It’s really a partnership.”

A series of Globe reports last spring uncovered illegal and dangerous living conditions, widespread overcrowding, and sanitary problems in neighborhoods popular with students. The city vowed to step up code enforcement over such issues.

“My greatest concern is the health and safety of every young college student living off campus in overcrowded apartments”

Walsh wrote.

However, the city acknowledged it has yet to fulfill its promise to increase the number of inspectors. Some landlords and tenants have resisted efforts to follow city housing codes. Students say they are forced to share crowded apartments simply to afford the rent.

For years, residents and families — fed up with both rising rents and quality-of-life issues associated with college students, including loud parties and drunken vandalism — have demanded that colleges house and police more of their own students, particularly undergraduates.

Last year, of the 136,000 students enrolled at four-year colleges and universities in Boston, an estimated 36,300 lived off campus, while 36,500 lived on campus, the report said. The rest resided in a mix of on- and off-campus housing in other municipalities.

Some area colleges have a head start on increasing undergraduate housing, as more than 7,000 new undergraduate dorm beds are currently under construction or have preliminary city approval, including at Boston University, Northeastern University, and the University of Massachusetts Boston.

Quirk, of the city’s Department of Neighborhood Development, said he believes that having data to support the

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John Nucci, Suffolk University spokesman

dorm-construction plan is a key driver for the enthusiasm of school leaders.

“It’s a very data-driven plan,” he said. “We now have data we didn’t have before.”

A key portion of that new information was provided recently by colleges.

After a fire at an off-campus apartment in Allston in April 2013 killed Binland Lee, a 22-year-old Boston University student, community activists called on colleges in Boston to release the addresses of their off-campus students to enable the city to detect overcrowded living conditions.

Most universities, citing privacy concerns, resisted until June, when Walsh met with college leaders, who largely agreed to disclose the students’ addresses.

In August, the City Council formalized the rule, making it a legal requirement for schools to give the addresses and related data to city officials each semester.

Another reason more campus leaders seem to be on board with the city’s plan: a new mayoral administration. Walsh’s predecessor, Thomas M. Menino, sometimes clashed with leaders of local colleges as he pushed them to house more students on campus.

“It’s refreshing that [Walsh] has brought universities into the conversation,” said John Nucci, a spokesman for Suffolk University, which houses 21 percent of its 5,800 undergraduates on its downtown campus. “He’s trying to establish a collaborative approach, and that’s a great idea.”

“I think most universities will be on board with the general principles of the plan,” Nucci added.

Boston College houses 80 percent of its 9,000 undergraduates on campus, the highest percentage in the city. The school has plans to add another 810 dorm beds soon, which would push its on-campus housing rate to nearly 90 percent.

“We support Mayor Walsh’s housing plan and look forward to working with him to meet our common goals,” campus spokesman Jack Dunn said.

Creating more student housing would free up some of Boston’s existing housing stock for working adults and families, Walsh’s report said. The city estimates that 16,000 new dorm beds would open up about 5,000 units to nonstudent renters.

City officials said they plan to work with neighborhood residents to establish, by 2015, a list of suitable locations and other criteria for new student housing.

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