

A return to days of old: Portland developers pitch boardinghouses as affordable housing

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Boardinghouses at 263 Cumberland Ave., left, and 273 Cumberland Ave. in Portland. A developer plans to put up a new four-story building, with 88 low-rent rooms, at 263 Cumberland Ave. *Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer*

As high-end condos and luxury hotels go up across Portland, some developers are leaning in the opposite direction, planning dozens of low-rent rooms with shared facilities in lodging houses reminiscent of another time.

At least three proposals are pending at City Hall to renovate or construct buildings full of bedrooms and shared kitchens, bathrooms and common areas. The developments bear a striking similarity to the cheap, flexible boardinghouses offered to masses of urban workers at the turn of the last century.

Developers say the lodging houses are a response to Portland's acute shortage of affordable places to live. But there is a financial angle, too – when you face construction prices at a 10-year high, a lodging house is cheaper to build than residences with individual plumbing, heating and electrical systems.

“You can’t build apartments; they are costing a fortune,” said Bill Simpson, owner of Class Acts Management.

Simpson wants to convert apartments at 1190 Forest Ave. into 20 single rooms. He has plans to put up a new four-story building with 88 rooms at 263 Cumberland Ave. to replace a boardinghouse he already owns there. He also owns another boardhouse next door, at 273 Cumberland Ave.

He plans clean, furnished, low-rent spaces that include utilities, WiFi and security systems. House rules require residents to check in, guests are not allowed after 9 p.m. and there is no drinking in the hallways or common areas.

Simpson thinks he can make lodging houses work financially with just a traditional bank loan and reliable rental income.

In contrast, developers building conventional residences “are having to charge \$1,600 a month for a one-bedroom apartment,” he said.

“I don’t think people can afford it, I don’t think it is going to last,” Simpson added. “I think people can afford \$800 a month.”

OTHER PROPOSALS

Simpson isn’t the only developer eyeing lodging houses, frequently referred to as single-room occupancy, or SROs.

Kevin Bunker and his company, Developers Collaborative, plan to convert a three-story former boys school at 66 State St. into 38 rooms for homeless women in recovery from opioid addiction with onsite staff and services from Amistad, a social services nonprofit.

The boardinghouse is part of an \$8 million project that includes a new four-story building with studio and one-bedroom apartments for low-income residents.

The project leans heavily on “housing first,” a philosophy that giving people a safe, stable place to live is a cost-effective and proven way to reduce homelessness, said project manager Laura Reading.

“The idea is that we are able to provide a continuum of housing,” Reading said.



Developer Bill Simpson at 1190 Forest Ave., where he plans to convert apartments into 20 single rooms.
Ben McCanna/Staff Photographer

A short walk away, at 160-166 State St., developer Josh Soley plans to build 39 single rooms in a former monastery he recently bought from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Portland. In an interview last week, Soley said his proposal would help address an affordable housing shortfall that policymakers and politicians have clamored about.

"I think the market determines what we need to build. I think there are enough people building \$700,000 condos and we could use some real rental apartments," Soley said.

CHEAP AND EFFICIENT

Even though these developments might turn heads in today's uber-trendy Portland, they would have been commonplace in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when single room accommodation was a dominant piece of urban America's housing mix.

Variouly called flophouses, rooming houses, boardinghouses and hotels, rooms rented by the week or month were cheap and efficient places for workers and immigrants to live in the center of rapidly developing U.S. cities.

But regulations, suburban sprawl and perceptions that lodging houses were connected with drugs, crime and poverty led to the destruction or conversion of many buildings after World War II.

Single-room accommodations, including studio and efficiency apartments, accounted for just 5 percent of Portland's housing stock in 2017, according to the Maine Housing Authority.

Portland allows lodging houses in its land use code, but there is no accurate accounting of how many are left in the city, said Planning and Urban Development Director Jeff Levine.

No new lodging houses have been built in the last five years, but it makes sense that developers are considering single rooms as the city struggles with homelessness, a housing shortage and finding places to live for hundreds of asylum seekers from sub-Saharan Africa.

"We've noticed a diversification of the type of housing stock being produced in the last few years," Levine said. "Anything that can get people into housing, especially those struggling to pay market rents."

Residents of Portland's few existing lodging houses say the living setup is not perfect, but it is affordable and better than the alternative, which for many is a homeless shelter or the street.

Bob Miller, 62, has lived in the boardinghouses on Cumberland Avenue for six years. When he moved to Portland about 40 years ago, there were more than two dozen lodging houses, he said.

Nowadays, there are barely any left, but a lot more people sleeping on the street.

“They could probably have a place to live if there were more places like this,” Miller said.

Even though rent is cheap compared to nearby apartment rents, \$800 a month is still a lot for a room, said Michael Barry, 56, who has lived in one of the houses on Cumberland Avenue for eight years. Barry helps around the building to subsidize the rent so he can save for other expenses.

It isn’t his favorite place to live, but he likes the location – close to the supermarket, City Hall, the hospital and bus lines to take him across Portland.

“Everything is right here,” Barry said.

A WELCOME DEVELOPMENT

A return of affordable lodging houses is a welcome development, but only if it provides quality homes, said Cullen Ryan, executive director of Community Housing of Maine, a nonprofit that provides places to live for homeless and other vulnerable people.

“The important thing is that they are well run and affordable to folks and there is adequate support for folks to be successful there,” Ryan said. “What we really don’t need are flophouses, places that are not well managed, not safe to stay.”

Most low-income housing in the U.S. gets built with federal tax credits to offset construction costs, but there is no equivalent incentive for boardinghouses, said Cara Courchesne, spokeswoman for the Maine State Housing Authority.

Local funding through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development can be used to build new lodging houses, but so far no developers have applied for assistance in Portland.

Single-room development emerges during periods of expensive housing and tight availability, Courchesne said.

“There are times when the need has felt as acute as it does right now,” she said. “Especially in Portland, where this boom is really huge and pushing a lot of people out, I can imagine this is looking more and more attractive.”

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