

Repurposing vacant schools for affordable housing program

Pursuant to RIGL § 45-53-10 the Department of Housing presents interim updates on implementation of the repurposing vacant schools for affordable housing program. The statute establishes a program to provide guidance and assistance in the repurposing of vacant and unused school buildings. The Department of Housing is committed to pursuing all viable avenues to affordable housing development in Rhode Island and views this as an important opportunity to partner with other state agencies and municipalities in that pursuit.

Even in advance of regulations for the program being promulgated by the RI Department of Education and assessments being conducted prior to the statutory deadline, the Department offers this preliminary report with a list of vacant schools identified by the Department of Education, updates on progress regarding assessments to be conducted through the program, and some preliminary observations that have emerged to date.

Schools identified

The Department received a list from the RI Department of Education (please see Attachment 1) of 13 schools that have been abandoned or are no longer being used by a school district. The RI Department of Education report did not identify any schools that are anticipated to become vacant.

Progress regarding assessments

The Statute requires that the Department of Housing consult with the following partners to conduct an assessment of identified properties within 150 days of receiving the list of schools:

- The Department of Health;
- The Department of Environmental Management;
- RI Housing and Mortgage Finance Corporation;
- Rhode Island Fire Marshal;
- Local zoning official; and
- Local planning official.

The Department of Housing has initiated conversations with the state agency partners to develop and initiate the work around conducting the vacant school assessments. Initial steps for conducting preliminary assessments have begun including conducting desktop reviews to identify whether the sites meet statutory requirements for proceeding with the evaluation and consulting with local officials to determine the status of the property.

The statute speaks to developing estimates of the cost of conversion. The Department of Housing will be collaborating with the task force partners to continue the process of conducting site inspections and identifying site-specific conditions. An assessment form has been developed to guide site inspections and help create preliminary assessments. The Department anticipates that the preliminary assessments will include high-level information regarding the cost of

redeveloping schools into housing, as well as some site-specific factors that will impact the cost. These include identification of known structural issues (e.g., status of roof or major building systems), potential environmental conditions, review of relevant deed restrictions, etc. While the Department is making efforts to inspect each site, several municipalities have created their own preliminary assessments and/or are currently in the process of finalizing next development steps for their specific sites.

The site assessment process will include:

- Review of current zoning and acceptable uses of property
- Review of records by the Department of Environmental Management to identify any known environmental issues for redeveloping the property
- Identification of known code issues present in the building
- Review of key infrastructure in the building (including but not limited to, plumbing, electrical, roof, façade, current heat/AC system)
- Inspection of property with local municipal officials

It is important to note that the redevelopment cost is dependent upon what the proposed project will entail. Developing conceptual site plans will be a key step for refining these assessments and guiding some of the key choices. As a follow-up to the preliminary assessments, the Department of Housing is working to engage additional assistance to help develop plans and more precise cost estimates. The department issued a solicitation in November 2023 for an architect or engineering firm to provide a feasibility study of potential adaptive re-use sites. RFP submissions are due in January. The Department of Housing looks forward to making this resource available going forward.

Preliminary observations

In the interim, the Department of Housing reached out to the following school districts to receive updates, discuss next steps, and if necessary schedule site visits for the purpose of assessing the schools:

1. Chariho
2. Middletown
3. Newport
4. North Kingstown
5. Providence
6. Smithfield
7. South Kingstown
8. Warwick

Of the 13 schools transmitted by RIDE, there are proactive steps being taken at the municipal level to redevelop 5 of these into housing developments. If completed, these projects would create more than 300 new units of housing across the state with 72 of those units identified as being affordable housing.

Here are preliminary observations and information regarding the status of each of the schools identified:

School identified	Preliminary observations
1904 Building – Town of Hopkinton (Chariho)	The Town of Hopkinton will be demolishing this building in 2024 due to a combination of safety concerns and the current state of the building.
Alan Shawn Feinstein Elementary School - Providence	While the Department stands ready to partner with Providence regarding these sites, the statute requires that properties in communities with greater than 10% affordable housing receive, “an affirmative vote of a majority of both the governing body of the school board and the municipality” in order for an assessment to be conducted by the State. Providence has been communicating with the State and next steps will be determined in the new year.
Aldrich Junior High School - Warwick	The City of Warwick is under agreement with Winn Developers to develop the school building into housing units. Winn’s submission includes a plan to build 15 studio units, 55 one-bedroom units, and five 2-bedroom units.
Berkeley-Peckham Elementary School - Middletown	The school building and a nearby former administrative building will be demolished as part of a larger redevelopment project led by the Town of Middletown. The current plan for the project includes 22 units of senior housing (100% affordable) and 35 units of family housing (100% affordable).
Carl G. Lauro Elementary School - Providence	While the Department of Housing stands ready to partner with Providence regarding these sites, the statute requires that properties in communities with greater than 10% affordable housing receive, “an affirmative vote of a majority of both the governing body of the school board and the municipality” in order for an assessment to be conducted by the State. Providence has been communicating with the State and next steps will be determined in the new year.
Coggeshall Elementary School - Newport	A potential developer was selected through an RFP process to develop the school site. That proposal is to build 32 units targeted as workforce housing.
Curtis Corner Middle School – South Kingstown	The Department of Housing is actively partnering with South Kingstown to determine next steps and schedule a site visit.
Former School Admin Building - Warwick	The former school admin building in Warwick has a deed restriction limiting its usage to educational purposes. The Department of Housing is actively working with the City of Warwick to determine next steps.
John F. Kennedy Elementary School - Middletown	The school building will be demolished as part of a larger redevelopment project led by the Town of Middletown. The current plan for the project includes 150 new housing units, with 10% of the developed units to be affordable.

South Road Elementary School – South Kingstown	The Department of Housing is actively partnering with South Kingstown to determine next steps and schedule a site visit.
Wakefield Elementary School – South Kingstown	The Department of Housing is actively partnering with South Kingstown to determine next steps and schedule a site visit.
Wickford Elementary School – North Kingstown	The Town of North Kingstown is currently under contract and has a purchase and sales agreement for development at this property.
William Winsor Elementary School - Smithfield	The Department of Housing is actively partnering with Smithfield to determine next steps and schedule a site visit.

Unsurprisingly, through the process of engaging municipalities, school districts, and the task force partners, one theme that has emerged is that in addition to taking the important first step of assessing feasibility and cost of converting schools, securing funding will also be a key precondition for achieving the goal of converting schools to affordable housing. While there is not a dedicated source of funding for converting schools into housing in Rhode Island, we look forward to partnering with state and municipal partners to identify potential sources and secure additional funding for these purposes.

Attachment 1:
Vacant Schools Identified

The Rhode Island Department of Education provided the following report to the Department of Housing in October of 2023.

Vacant School Building Report – October 1, 2023
Pursuant to R.I.G.L. 45-53-10(c)

The following information was collected from school and municipal officials as part of the annual Housing Aid submission.

- *School districts, municipalities, and charter schools reporting vacant/unused school building as of July 1, 2023:*
 - Chariho
 - 1904 Building owned by Town of Hopkinton
 - Middletown
 - John F. Kennedy Elementary School, 740 West Main Road
 - Berkeley-Peckham Elementary School, 678 Green End Avenue
 - Newport
 - Coggeshall Elementary School, 133 Van Zandt Avenue
 - North Kingstown
 - Wickford Elementary School, 99 Phillips Street
 - Providence
 - Alan Shawn Feinstein Elementary School, 1450 Broad Street
 - Carl G. Lauro Elementary School, 99 Kenyon Street
 - Smithfield
 - William Winsor Elementary School, 562 Putnam Pike
 - South Kingstown
 - South Road Elementary School
 - Wakefield Elementary School
 - Curtis Corner Middle School
 - Warwick
 - Aldrich Junior High School, 771 Post Road
 - Former School Admin Building, 34 Warwick Lake Avenue
- *School districts, municipalities, and charter schools reporting no vacant/unused school buildings as of July 1, 2023:*
 - Barrington
 - Bristol-Warren
 - Burrillville
 - Coventry
 - Cranston
 - Cumberland
 - East Greenwich
 - East Providence

- Exeter-West Greenwich
 - Foster-Glocester
 - Glocester
 - Jamestown
 - Johnston
 - Lincoln
 - Little Compton
 - Narraganset
 - New Shoreham
 - North Providence
 - North Smithfield
 - Pawtucket
 - Scituate
 - Tiverton
 - West Warwick
 - Westerly
 - Woonsocket
 - Achievement First
 - Beacon Charter School
 - Blackstone Academy
 - Blackstone Valley Prep
 - Compass School
 - Excel Academy
 - Greene School
 - Hope Academy
 - Kingston Hill Academy
 - Learning Community
 - Nowell Academy
 - Nuestro Mundo Charter School
 - Paul Cuffee School
 - Providence Preparatory Charter School
 - RI Nurses Institute
 - RISE Prep Mayoral Academy
 - Segue Institute for Learning
 - Southside Elementary Charter School
 - Times2 Charter School
 - Trinity Academy for the Performing Arts
 - Village Green Virtual Charter School
-
- *School districts, municipalities, and charter schools reporting buildings that are currently in use which they anticipate will be vacant/unused by December 31, 2023:*
 - None
 - *School districts, municipalities, and charter schools that did not respond:*
 - Central Falls
 - Foster
 - Portsmouth

- Charrete Charter School
- Highlander Charter School
- International Charter School
- Apprenticeship Exploration School (formerly New England Laborers Academy)

Attachment 2:
Supplementary Updates Provided by Municipalities

The Department of Housing contacted relevant municipalities to receive an update on the listed properties and determine next steps. With a short window for responses, not all municipalities have provided an update for this report. Additional details will be provided in the next report and in the assessments as they are conducted. For the majority of properties listed, the municipalities are already taking action towards redevelopment or demolition.

Chariho (Town of Hopkinton) - 1904 Building:

The building is scheduled for demolition in 2024. Below is an excerpt of a HUD grant application submitted by the Town describing the current situation.

“The Town of Hopkinton, Rhode Island is a small municipality located proximal to the Connecticut state line and is located in Washington County. We are a rural community populated by several distinct villages and located off of I-95 Exit 1. The community takes pride in that it is literally a gateway to the state of Rhode Island. With a population a little over 7700 residents, we have limited ability to commence in Capital Improvement Projects, and share a school system with neighboring towns, Richmond and Charlestown. As we took advantage of better economic times to modernize school facilities in our community, we built a new modern elementary school in Ashaway and left the existing 1904 School on site. This building completed in the early 2000’s led to the closing of the 1904 School. Little funding existed to address modernization of this now unutilized facility and its maintenance became a lesser priority to maintaining the larger modern school located literally on the same site. With the pandemic and its pressure on municipalities to meet unprecedented needs, we sought a Congressional earmark to affect the long overdue demolition of this school. The risk to the community from this older wood facility catching fire and its nuisance as it declined, coupled with exploding costs to refurbish it, made this (demolition) the most cost effective and realistic option.

Some examples of the Town's efforts to find potential uses for the building can be seen going back to 2009 when the Town invested in an architectural contract with Durkee Brown Viveriros to determine what could be done with the aging structure. Again in 2014, the Town paid Crossman Engineering to perform a review of the old elementary school to provide a feasibility study for the building. Both studies came up with the same conclusion that it would be too costly to reuse the building as a school facility given the conditions of the building, the presence of hazardous materials, and that the proximity to the existing Ashaway Elementary School, which would be too problematic for commercial or residential uses.

Despite these findings, the Town continued to pursue other possible options. In 2015 the Town hired Hoffman engineering to conduct an Environmental Materials Review which determined the building had a significant amount of asbestos present and "very high lead paint levels." At that time, the Town Council discussed the possibility of renting or leasing the facility. Later that year, the Town hired a real estate agent from Coldwell Banker Cahoone Realtor Group to search for potential tenants to lease the building from the Town, but after a year, a new tenant did not materialize.

After decades of assessing and researching options, in 2018, the Town Council concluded that the only feasible and most prudent move for the Town would be to demolish the building. The Town Council at the time stated that the Town should move forward with razing the building because there didn't seem to be any other alternative.

The second fundamental factor that led to the Town's decision to demolish the building was the overwhelming concerns from previous Town Council members, the Chariho School District, Emergency Services Representatives, and the public at large for the children's safety. In Talia's report, you will read dozens of comments in public meetings from the before-mentioned parties discussing the safety of the building and the danger it presents to our community. The primary concern is the location of the building which is just 30 feet from the current Ashaway Elementary School, making the site a severe threat to the children's safety.

The Ashaway School Safety Team was established in 2015 with the primary focus of getting the 1904 Building taken down. The Safety Team consisted of several Hopkinton residents and parents of the Ashaway Elementary School students. The concerns of the Safety Team were primarily the safety of the children attending the existing elementary school. At multiple public meetings, members spoke of numerous fears including the possibility of an active shooter in the building, children attempting to enter the vacant building and getting hurt, the building being occupied by displaced individuals, and the high potential of the old structure being set on fire. The Safety Team still exists today and is applying pressure on Town representatives to have the building demolished as soon as possible.

In 2018 the Chief of the Ashaway Fire Department, Ronnie Sposato, spoke at a Town Council meeting about the safety concerns the building posed. He stated that the 1904 building was "the single biggest fire hazard in the whole Town of Hopkinton due to the close proximity to the new building, the lack of water and lack of a sprinkler system." He went on to state that the Department would need 20 trucks to respond if there was ever a fire to protect the new building due to combustibles and toxins inside the 1904 building and the lack of city water supply on site. At the same Town Council meeting, the Town's Chief of Police echoed the same concerns as Chief Sposato.

The Police Chief, David Palmer, was so concerned about the building that he felt obligated to develop a Threat Assessment for the 1904 building. The Threat Assessment cites a series of concerns the building creates for residents, students, and Police personnel, including a highly problematic location for an active shooter situation. The possibility of an active shooter in the building is not one that I even like to think about. Still, it is undoubtedly a legitimate fear and another reason to take the building down promptly.

In more recent years, the concerns of residents and the parents of students have become louder and louder. It has been made abundantly clear from the residents of Hopkinton and the Hopkinton Town Councils that the safety of the children is the primary concern and trumps all other factors. In fact, this project is time sensitive because it needs to come down before someone gets hurt. Residents, parents, Town Council members, and first responders all want to see the building come down as soon as possible to eliminate the possibility of something tragic happening in our community."

Middletown - John F. Kennedy Elementary School:

The JFK school building is on town property slated to be redeveloped for a mixed-use development, which will include multi-family residential, commercial space and a hotel. The Town is working with a private development team on final design and a long-term property lease. The school building will be demolished as part of the plan, with the creation of approximately 150 units of housing proposed to be constructed on the site, including at least 10% affordable units.



Concept art of the West Main – Coddington (former John F. Kennedy School site) proposed development. Submitted by the Town of Middletown.

Middletown - Berkeley-Peckham Elementary School:

The Berkeley-Peckham school building is also proposed for demolition as part of a two-site affordable housing development proposed by the town. The project includes 22 units of senior housing, 100% affordable, at the Berkely-Peckham property and 35 units of family housing, 100% affordable, and the Oliphant School administration building at 26 Oliphant Lane (school administration will be relocated). These sites both recently received master plan approval from the Planning Board and will be seeking construction funding through RI Housing in January 2024. The Town recently posted an RFP for a development partner in this project, who will be selected in early January 2024.



Concept art of 26 Oliphant Lane proposed development. Submitted by the Town of Middletown.



Concept art of 650 Green End Avenue proposed development. Submitted by the Town of Middletown.

Newport - Coggeshall Elementary School:

The adaptive reuse and redevelopment of the Coggeshall school building and site is part of a broader Newport City Council effort to increase housing availability in the city. In February of 2023, the City Council approved a Resolution which stated the “City of Newport is facing an unprecedented housing crisis,” and it identified the Coggeshall School as an underutilized city-owned property that “may be suitable for the development of much needed housing;”

The building was constructed in 1899 and formerly used as an elementary school. Due to declining enrollment, the school was closed in 2013 and the building and parcels were turned over to the city and they have remained unused in the decade since.

The city issued a request for proposals for reuse of the school, which prioritized the creation of work-force housing. A potential developer has been selected, with a proposal to develop 32 dwelling units, with a mix of one, two and three bedroom units. And all with rents within the workforce housing range.

The city is currently conducting public outreach regarding the selected proposal and two neighborhood meetings have been held. We're looking forward to the reuse of the school as housing, saving an historic building and helping with the City's housing needs.

North Kingstown - Wickford Elementary School:

The town of North Kingstown is currently under contract and has a purchase and sales agreement for development at this property.



Concept art of Wickford Elementary proposed development. Submitted to the Town of North Kingstown by Newport Collaborative Architects.

Providence – Carl G. Lauro Elementary School:

In December 2023, the City issued a Request for Proposals seeking qualified proposals to redevelop the building as either (1) a public school dedicated to serving a majority of enrollees live in Providence or, 2) for housing with at least ten percent (10%) of the total units in the development at or below -eighty percent (80%) of Area Median Income (AMI). The RFP will remain open until January 29, 2024.

South Kingstown - South Road Elementary School:

This site was previously reviewed by State contractors to assess potential for affordable home conversion. The Town is continuing to proceed with due diligence at a local level. The Town currently has a limited hazardous building material survey being conducted on the building at the start of the year to determine the level of remediation required if reuse is desired. The study will also include an estimate for demolition if it is preferred to reuse the site for affordable housing or other options.

South Kingstown - Wakefield Elementary School:

This Elementary school facility has still not been officially turned over to the town. The schools ceased use of the facility this year and it appears that the official transfer may occur in the late winter/ spring. The Town expects to start evaluating this site for reuse/ redevelopment in the spring.

South Kingstown - Curtis Corner Middle School:

This facility is not expected to be turned over to the Town. There are plans in process to take down the CCMS building and redevelop the site into an athletic complex to support the SK High School athletics program. The site would therefore remain under care, custody and control of the School District. The Town has a bond referendum scheduled for May that will determine if the district moves forward with the construction of a new high school at Columbia Road and new athletic complex at the CCMS site. If the bond does not pass, then the building may be turned over to the Town provided the schools have no further use for the building.

Warwick - Aldrich Junior High School:

The City of Warwick is under agreement with Winn Developers to develop the school building into housing units. Winn's submission includes a plan to build 15 studio units, 55 one-bedroom units, and five 2-bedroom units.

Warwick - Former School Admin Building (34 Warwick Lake Ave):

The former school administration building currently has a deed restriction on the property, restricting usage.