

Specters of old state hospitals vanish as new uses take shape

By Robert Preer, Globe Correspondent | July 8, 2007

Scattered across Massachusetts are imposing brick and stone buildings that resemble castles, set on hundreds of acres of meadows, fields, and woods -- places once thought to be ideal for the care of the mentally ill and disabled.

Nearly all of the sprawling state hospitals and schools, once called insane asylums and other names that sound cruel today, were closed in the 1970s and 1980s as mental health treatment and residential facilities switched to smaller, group settings. After several decades of neglect, most of these unusual properties finally are now finally being redeveloped.

Now, from new municipal facilities to retail complexes to sprawling residential developments, the abandoned hospitals and their grounds are undergoing renovation for an extraordinary range of uses. One property alone, the former Boston State Hospital in Dorchester and Mattapan, is host to multiple developments. It already has a new nature center, state laboratory, and dozens of suburban-style homes, with hundreds more condominiums and apartments, a fitness center, nursing home, and community garden to come.

Grafton State Hospital houses a veterinary school. Restaurants and stores are coming to former state hospitals in Lakeville and Foxborough. Danvers will have an out patient medical center.

"Each one is its own story," said Peter Norstrand, deputy commissioner of the state Division of Capital Asset Management, the state agency overseeing the properties. "They are mostly mixed uses with a preponderance of housing."

Each of the sales took years to accomplish and required legislative votes to transfer ownership of the properties. Danvers State Hospital sold for \$19 million and Metropolitan State Hospital for \$10.6 million; a 50-acre slice of the 1,000-acre Grafton State Hospital recently sold for nearly \$2 million.

"We've certainly generated proceeds, but when you factor in costs of maintaining the properties over the years, it's hard to say we've made money," said Norstrand.

Among the hospitals being redeveloped:

Boston State Hospital. At the far end Boston's Emerald Necklace, near Forest Hills Cemetery and Franklin Park, this 250-acre campus was closed in 1979. A light-filled Nature Center for the Massachusetts Audubon Society, the Massachusetts Medical School biological laboratory, and approximately 100 one- and two-family homes are completed. The two residential projects are a 99-unit mix of single-family housing and duplexes, called Harvard Commons, by Cruz Development Corp., and Olmsted Green, a 500-unit condominium and apartment complex, co developed by Lena Park Community Development Corp. and New Boston Fund. The development also will have a community center, nursing home, and community gardens.

Danvers State Hospital. This Victorian-era campus was one of the most notorious state mental institutions before its closure in 1992, and its Gothic setting played host to the shooting of a horror

movie in 2001. AvalonBay Communities Inc. is now building a neighborhood on around 75 acres of the grounds, including 433 luxury apartments and 64 condominiums. Some are already occupied but construction on others was delayed when a fire swept through several buildings in May. Portions of the historic Kirkbride building, with its steeply pitched slate roofs and spires, will be preserved.

Foxboro State Hospital. A new public safety building for Foxborough's police and fire departments is already under construction on this 160-acre property. And site work has begun for Chestnut Green, a 93-acre community with playing fields, 60,000 square feet of retail space, five office buildings, and 203 residences, a mix of condominiums, apartments, and single-family. The developers are VinCo Properties, Intoccia Construction Co., and Douglas A. King Builders Inc.

Grafton State Hospital. This 1,000-acre property in the central Massachusetts hills near Worcester already has Tufts Veterinary School on half of it. Also on the property are the Federal Job Corps offices and residential facilities run by the state Department of Youth Services and state Department of Mental Retardation. A business park is being developed on 121 acres, and housing is planned for a 50-acre parcel. The Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority has a commuter rail station there, too.

Lakeville State Hospital. Closed in 1992, this 72-acre property near the Lakeville-Middleborough town line and a commuter rail station sold for \$2.4 million at auction in 2002 to the Newton real estate firm National Development, with proceeds to fund the state Clean Elections program. The existing structures are scheduled to be demolished later this year, and National Development is planning to build a supermarket, department store, restaurant, two office buildings, and 100 units of senior housing.

Metropolitan State Hospital. AvalonBay won the rights in December 2003 to redevelop a 23-acre portion of this 490-acre campus near Route 2 in Lexington, Belmont, and Waltham. The company is building 387 apartments on the Lexington land, and about 250 more acres are preserved for open space and recreation.

Northampton State Hospital. This 126-acre campus was closed in 1996. Non profit developer Community Builders Inc. and state agency Mass Development plan to build 100 single-family homes, 107 apartments, an assisted-living facility, child-care center, open space, and 476,000 square feet of office, light industrial, and retail space. Demolition of existing buildings began this year.

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