

Avery school lease supports arts in East Dedham

By **Dave Eisenstadter** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JANUARY 24, 2013



BILL GREENE/GLOBE STAFF

The Avery School in East Dedham will have a new life as Mother Brook Arts and Community Center.

After serving young students in one of Dedham's poorest sections, the former Avery Elementary School building will now contribute to that neighborhood's blossoming arts scene.

Just five years ago, few would have called Dedham an arts town, but the signing of a

lease for an arts and community center at last week's selectmen's meeting is putting a capstone on what state Representative Paul McMurry is calling a renaissance.

"Dedham has an engaged and involved citizenry, and we're active at many different levels," McMurry, an East Dedham Democrat who serves on the center's board of directors, said. The focus on arts "has been the latest trend that has become a priority."

The Mother Brook Arts and Community Center will officially move into the building on March 1, according to the lease agreement. The space will eventually house lofts for artist studios, a gallery and performing arts space, a cafe, and space for local groups to hold meetings and other events, co-executive director Jean Ford Webb said.

Early in the organization's formation, Ford Webb and others held an information session for artists and immediately found 18 who were interested in space, she said. The completed center will hold 27 artist studios, and Ford Webb believes that once the center puts out an official call for artists, demand will exceed supply.

She noted that a similar arts center she previously worked with, the Emerson Umbrella Center for the Arts in Concord, has a seven-year waiting list for studios.

"I've spent a lot of time looking at arts centers throughout New England, those that have artist space, and those places immediately have long waiting lists," Ford Webb said.

What has been intriguing for many residents is that such an idea would gain support in Dedham.

In 2008, when town officials debated a proposal for a new Avery school, the future of the old building became an issue. "Dedham has a history of tearing down its history," was an often-repeated saying in the discussion, referring to other historic town buildings that had been disposed of as newer ones replaced them.

Selectmen responded by forming an Avery Reuse Committee, which spent a year speaking to town department heads and other residents about what could be done with the space.

No one wanted it. Police, fire, and Council on Aging representatives – who were all looking for new buildings – found the Avery building unsuitable, the committee found. Residents were nearly unanimous that they did not want the building used for housing of any kind.

As the committee approached its deadline for a proposal, Selectman Paul Reynolds came forward with an idea – an arts and community center. Much to the surprise of most involved, the 11th-hour proposal quickly gained traction and became the unanimous recommendation of the reuse committee.

Joe Heisler, chairman of that committee and an East Dedham resident, said he was skeptical about an arts center until he and other committee members looked into financing.

“While East Dedham has never been known or thought of as an arts community, I’ve seen neighborhoods in Boston never considered artistic havens either that successfully made use of arts and culture to generate more interest in the neighborhood,” Heisler said in an interview. “I began to say, ‘Why not East Dedham?’ ”

Now in its new building, Avery is the town’s only elementary school that qualifies for federal Title I funds for lower-income residents. Heisler said the working-class East Dedham neighborhood served by Avery rarely gets the respect it deserves, and that he and others are determined to change that.

Those changes have been taking place. The town’s mitigation committee allocated \$150,000 for a fully accessible playground at Condon Park in East Dedham in 2011. In 2012, cleanup began at nearby Mill Pond Park, and a fish statue by local artist Gints Grinbergs was installed.

At the same time, several arts organizations have sprouted across Dedham.

The Dedham School of Music formed in 2008 in response to cuts in the public schools’ music department. A Dedham open studios tour began in 2011 and quickly led to the formation of the Dedham Square Artists Guild. Last year, the Dedham Public Art Project positioned 15 decorated five-foot fiberglass rabbits around town.

Kerry Hawkins, a graphic designer and one of the founders of the Dedham Square Artists Guild, said it was impressive to find so many artists living in and near Dedham.

Fellow guild founder Jennifer Barsamian, now a member of the Dedham school committee, organized the Dedham Open Studios event and has had to limit the number of participating artists, Hawkins said.

As for the Mother Brook center that will be located in the former Avery school, Hawkins said it would potentially fill several needs of the artist community, providing space for work and exhibitions.

“It feels right for the town, and people really want it,” Hawkins said.

However, some residents were hesitant about the arts and community center, raising concerns that it would not raise revenue for the town.

As part of negotiations, town officials insisted that Mother Brook pay some rent. Other similar spaces, including Emerson center in Concord, have been leased or sold to their host organizations essentially for free, said Ford Webb.

This point extended the negotiations with the town, but Ford Webb said everyone was happy with the agreement that was reached. The organization will pay utility costs in the building and begin paying rent at the space on July 1, 2014.

The 10-year lease agreement stipulates that Mother Brook’s rent will initially be 2.5 percent of revenue collected from artists. That will increase to 5 percent, then 7.5 percent, as the organization becomes more established. In exchange, the town agreed to help the organization with 50 percent of the cost of replacing the building’s boiler.

For McMurtry, the cooperation is one of the reasons he has high hopes for the space.

“I truly believe that for this to be successful, it has to be a partnership,” McMurtry said.

McMurtry, who owns a small art-house movie theater in Dedham Square, said his hope was that the Mother Brook center grows to be a world-class space, something of

which the town and the state can be proud.

More information about the center is available from Jean Ford Webb at jford@fordwebb.com, or visit www.motherbrookarts.org.

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