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Barracks ready-made for housing

By [Paul McMorrow](#) | DECEMBER 27, 2011



PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Vicksburg Square at the former Fort Devens Army base includes buildings that backers say could be converted to residential housing.

BY ALL reasonable measures, the old Army barracks at Devens is a perfect place to build housing. The barracks at Devens's Vicksburg Square sit near an active rail line, down the street from a growing cluster of jobs. Utilities are already in place. Building at Devens means putting a historic development back into productive use, instead of bulldozing forests to build far-flung subdivisions. It's exactly what planners envision when they talk about building smart.

But this is Massachusetts, so reasonable measures don't apply. Instead, Boston-based developer Trinity Financial is facing stiff opposition to its bid to turn an abandoned barracks complex into housing for seniors, veterans, and working-class families. Devens includes territory in three towns — Harvard, Ayer, and Shirley — and Trinity has to get all three to go along with the proposal. Officials in Ayer and Harvard are kicking up plenty of opposition.

These kinds of fights are precisely why housing costs are such a burden for Massachusetts residents. States that build housing grow jobs, while states that don't build housing don't grow. The inability to add to the state's supply of housing also explains why apartment rents around Boston have hit record highs in the middle of a deep economic slump. If Trinity is having difficulty building 246 new apartments on an old base that used to house 9,000 people, where, exactly, can anyone build around here?

Getting permission to build housing in Devens is inherently difficult. The law that governs the former Army base was written nearly two decades ago, at the depths of New England's last real estate crash. It protected neighboring towns' battered real estate markets by capping the amount of housing allowed on Devens at 282 units. To lift the housing cap, the three towns all have to agree. While the state agency MassDevelopment owns the former base, the bulk of it lies in Harvard. Meanwhile, suspicion of MassDevelopment also runs high in Ayer, where most of the Trinity Financial site lies.

Thousands of military housing units were demolished after the base's 1996 closure, and since then, Devens's neighbors have come to think of it as a 4,400-acre industrial park. This view was evident in 2006, when Harvard and Ayer voters shot down a bid to spin off the complex as the state's 352nd town, and again in 2009, when Ayer voters torpedoed a proposal to allow the construction of 350 apartments at the abandoned barracks.

Trinity came to Devens after the failed 2009 vote. MassDevelopment needed a developer to help smooth things over with Ayer. The old barracks, which were originally zoned for commercial and industrial use, have been vacant for 15 years, and the historic buildings need to be redeveloped before they fall down. Trinity pitched 246 apartments, most of which would be set aside for seniors, vets, and families making working-class incomes. While the developer appears to be making some inroads in Ayer, where anything involving Devens is a tough sell, it has run into unexpected opposition in Harvard, which voted to approve 350 apartments on the same site two years ago.

Harvard officials are raising all sorts of objections to the Trinity plan. They're bringing up parking and density and school costs. The most glaring difference this time around, though, is that the plan Harvard approved two years ago was heavily slanted toward market-rate units, while Trinity's is heavily subsidized. Town officials have suggested redeveloping Vicksburg as market-rate condominiums; MassDevelopment said last week that proposal might never be economically feasible.

It's easy to make a caricature out of a wealthy rural town (they have horses and everything!) that lines up behind market-rate housing but turns against affordable development. But choking off new construction of either kind means that huge chunks of the state's population struggle with housing costs, no matter where they live.

Over 40 percent of the households in the state make less than \$50,000 per year - the rough cutoff point for Trinity's affordable Devens development. A quarter of all renters in Massachusetts are devoting at least half their income to just making rent. Half of the state's renters are now paying unaffordable rents, a number that's up dramatically from 10 years ago. In Harvard, one in every three households struggles with the high cost of housing. These aren't problems for poor towns or rich towns. And they won't be solved by stonewalling development.

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