

A clean sweep makes room for what 2015 will bring

By Aaron Nicodemus
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My company email has a 1 gigabyte memory limit, meaning that all the emails I squirrel away for later use have an expiration date. Occasionally, I have to go through my emails and delete them, so I am allowed to send new emails.

To that end, here are some partial column ideas that never fully formed. As one of my former reporter colleagues used to say, "There's good stuff in here!"

SMOC projects

The South Middlesex Opportunity Council has a couple of projects in the planning stages that I was able to get snippets of information about, but not much more, because of the holidays.

SMOC has applied for federal funding to "construct additional microbusiness incubator spaces at the Martin Luther King Jr. Opportunity Center," according to a recent legal advertisement in the Telegram & Gazette. The project includes "a buildout of 15 new incubator spaces on the second floor and renovations to make the second floor energy efficient and ADA (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliant."

SMOC purchased the MLK Center at 237 Chandler St., Worcester, a few years ago and has used the space mostly for offices. The federal government set a Jan. 14 deadline for public comment on the proposal.

In another email I received, SMOC is listed as the developer of 42 units of affordable housing on Bixby Road in Spencer. The project is receiving state tax credits for creating affordable housing.

According to Jane Lane, a SMOC spokeswoman, "The entire project will be affordable housing and was approved and permitted under a special permit by the Spencer Planning Board. No further permitting is necessary other than typical construction permits. It will be reserved for families earning less than 80 percent of area median income. Two- and 3-bedroom townhouses, including one-car garage, across 11 buildings. It is located right off Main Street, which has public transportation.

Construction will begin in spring 2015, with estimated completion date the end of 2016."

SMOC purchased the fully permitted property from Patrick Gallant for \$425,0000. The property includes 15 acres, she wrote.

DMH moves to Plantation Street

Earlier this year, the Department of Mental Health moved its offices into the building at 361 Plantation St., next to the Beechwood Hotel. Charles Birbara, who owns the Beechwood and the building, told me that he spent a lot of time and money bringing the building up to the DMH's standards. The building had previously housed psychiatric services and a psychiatric clinic for the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

The Beechwood is set to undergo a multimillion-dollar renovation and upgrade in 2015. Dr. Birbara has also talked to me about expanding the Beechwood. The expansion would grow from the function room off Ceres Bistro, between the existing parking lot and Plantation Street. But those expansion plans are on hold, apparently, because they were noticeably absent from the Beechwood's recent announcement of its renovation plans.

More Masonic Health System changes

I've heard some responses to my recent story about financial pressures at Masonic Health System and its main facility, the Overlook at Charlton.

I'm told by reliable sources that six vice presidents received their walking papers shortly after the story ran, part of the 25 layoffs that the nonprofit had announced where imminent.

I also heard that on the day my story on the Masonic Health System ran on the front page of the Telegram & Gazette, copies distributed throughout the Overlook that day were censored. Someone had carefully blacked out the Masonic story with magic marker, but let the rest of the newspaper reach its readers unmolested. Why, I wondered, did they distribute the newspapers at all?

Happy New Year!

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