

RI BUSINESS

Brown University rejects all East Side residents' recommendations for proposed residence halls

Residents had asked that the school restore retail shops, reduce the size of the buildings, and make the design compatible with the architecture in the historic neighborhood

By [Alexa Gagosz](#) Globe Staff, Updated July 6, 2021, 6:13 p.m.



The targeted mini plaza at 250 Brook Street. Brown University is looking to tear down three homes and a small shopping plaza in Providence to build two dorm halls. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

PROVIDENCE — Brown University is pushing ahead with its first development project for student residence halls in nearly 30 years, rejecting recommendations from the community in which those dorms will be built.

East Side residents and their councilman, John Goncalves of Ward 1, expressed concerns that the new dorms would change the look and feel of the historic neighborhood in which they will be built and that the university's tax-exempt status would cause their property taxes to increase.

The latest design, which was proposed in April, incorporates green space with two multistory buildings along Brook Street, which is lined with single-family homes. The residence halls will have 350 beds for undergraduate students, which was a reduction of the initial plan's 400. But the development would knock down historic homes in Fox Point, which are not protected under preservation law, as well as a small shopping plaza owned by the university, displacing some businesses and a Providence Police substation.

The student housing had been on the university's wish list since the early 1990s. But residents had long sought to preserve the quaint, colonial look of the area.

Over the last several months, Goncalves, a Brown alumnus, has gathered more than 1,000 signatures on a petition asking Brown to reduce the size of the dorms so they do not "tower over abutting properties or create a cavern along the street." The petition also asked for dorms' design to be compatible with neighboring architecture, for the first-floor retail space to be restored, and to preserve the three existing houses instead of tearing them down.



The university did try to sell the homes, which they own, for \$10 each and offered to help relocate them. However, no one has completed the application to do so.

After rounds of community engagement, Brown came back with a final answer, rejecting all of the recommendations in the petition.

Goncalves sent a letter to Brown President Christina Paxson on June 29, expressing his dismay over the university's rejection of the petition, which was also signed by students, alumni, and faculty members.

"We, and members of the community, appreciate Brown's vested interest in having more students live on campus to alleviate local neighborhood and housing concerns. We believe that moving 350 students back onto campus, while not raising undergraduate enrollment, is a commendable goal," read the letter to Paxson. "While we appreciate Brown University's various meetings with local stakeholders, we do think that Brown University has undermined its commitment to meaningful engagement with neighbors and community organizations, given the fact that it was unwilling to revise its plans to reflect the desires of over a thousand community members and neighborhood residents."

"We were under the impression that they would compromise with fulfilling at least one request," Goncalves told the Globe on Tuesday.

Brian Clarke, a spokesman for the university, confirmed that the university had received Goncalves' letter and said Tuesday, "not only does the residence hall project as a whole address community input about student housing on College Hill, the University has to date made a number significant revisions in response to concerns expressed previously in the engagement process "

One of the most contentious issues focused on the loss of retail space.

In the small shopping plaza, the East Side Mini Mart, which has stood as an affordable corner store since the early 1990s, will close sometime in September. Construction on the new dorms is slated to begin in October, and the buildings will be open for the fall 2023 semester. Residents said they want the retail space to be restored “to be inclusive of the community and contribute to city taxes” since Brown does not pay property taxes to the city of Providence but regular homeowners do.

In a [story recently published by Globe Rhode Island](#), some East Side residents outlined how their property have dramatically increased as Brown has taken over more property within the institutional zone for tax-exempt purposes.

“If we kept the retail end, it would reduce the number of beds even further,” said Russel Carey, Brown’s vice president of planning and policy, in a recent interview. “There’s plenty of retail in the area, ... so I don’t think that is really a significant loss.”

Another issue: the project is located outside of the Historic District Overlay, allowing the school to avoid the Historic District Commission process — “a process that gives neighbors recourse and a public opportunity to weigh in on the scale, massing, and design to ensure its consistency and harmony with the historic fabric of the neighborhood,” Goncalves said.

“There’s a difference between presenting a plan and actually partaking in meaningful, community input and having those dialogues. That’s the disconnect here, and it’s created a lot of resentment in the neighborhood,” said Goncalves. “Some of the neighbors think that Brown isn’t necessarily a good neighbor when it comes to these projects. And that’s really unfortunate.”

Clarke said that while the university recognizes that the revisions made in response to feedback and Brown’s efforts to relocate the historic houses “will not be seen as sufficient by all neighbors, and that a preferred outcome for some might be a dramatically smaller

by its neighbors, and that a preferred outcome for some might be a dramatically smaller residence hall or no residence hall on this particular site,” he said the project goals from

the start have been informed by public input. Clarke said the public engagement process began 18 months ago.

“There have been a wide variety of perspectives, often conflicting, shared by local neighbors, and while the university can’t address every individual concern, we will continue to plan, design, and construct the residence halls in a responsible and respectful manner,” said Clarke.

The East Side Mini Mart, which opened in the early 1990s, will close sometime in September. Construction on the new dorms is slated to begin in October, and the buildings will be open for the fall 2023 semester.

Alexa Gagosz can be reached at alexa.gagosz@globe.com. Follow her on Twitter [@alexagagosz](https://twitter.com/alexagagosz).

[Show comments](#)