Boston Housing Authority Resident Advisory Board, external Minutes, Nov. 14, 2024 meeting

Minutes from last meeting approved. There were some additional materials distributed which had not made it to the packet the RAB had received (Financial Resources, revised chart on voluntary conversion (updated Per Unit costs), Attachment B (state capital grants).

1/ Presentation on Language Access Plan, 4-Factor Analysis – Sheyla Carew from the BHA said the “4 Factors” in the Language Access Plan were number of people provided access, the frequency of requests, the nature of the programs requiring language access, and the resources set aside. She went through slides summarizing the Plan, which was provided in the Annual Plan. She noted that while the demand for Haitian Creole had increased, it was still below 3% of total population in both applicant and resident pool, so BHA was still limiting the mandatory translations to Chinese and Spanish, but that at developments, translation will be in accordance with the language needs at that site. The number of languages covered and the number of requests had increased over last year (from 12,000 to 17,000 on language line). While volunteer resources had dropped off during pandemic, they have increased in past year (44 new volunteers this year, as opposed to 9 in prior year). Developments are using language access services more (doubled from 500 last year to 1000 this year). A RAB member asked that her development be considered for the Wellness Connects program given need, and Sheyla will follow up. Another RAB member noted some social workers she knew of who were trying to serve BHA residents/applicants with language needs, and Sheyla said she could coordinate with her.

2/ Presentation on BHA Capital Plan (State) – Asha Savarirayan from BHA discussed both the funding that BHA receives for its state public housing portfolio, from Executive Office of Housing and Livable Communities (EOHLC) and additional grants, which are used to support the BHA’s sustainability initiative and its first time homeownership program. The regular EOHLC funding included the $10 million Heating Ventilation and Air Conditioning & related work at Msgr. Powers (elder/disabled hsg in South Boston). The BHA also completed several authority-wide surveys, for roofing, building envelopes, stair halls, and mechanical work citywide. The authority-wide surveys document and prioritizes the deficiencies to create targeted projects within the five-year plan. Other work also included some Chapter 689 group home renovations, the Gallivan Blvd electrical load center upgrade work, and the installation of three 500 Kva Transformer project at West Broadway. The sustainability grants were part of BHA & City’s effort to go fossil fuel free by 2030. The homeownership piece is focused on a subset of BHA’s scattered-site Chapter 705 units. BHA received $8.75 million in a repositioning grant from EOHLC that is allowing BHA to replace 25 scattered-site units with new units (currently under construction) at BHA’s Old Colony community. Since those 25 units are being replaced with brand new apartment units, BHA will seek to dispose of those 25 units as homeownership opportunities for first-time low-income homebuyers. Mac McCreight from GBLS noted that the Chapter 705 repositioning had come to the BHA Monitoring Committee a while ago, and one of the concerns was making sure existing residents who currently live in those units and who could not afford to become homeowners had adequate relocation/rehousing protections. Joe Bamberg from BHA said that some of the 25 units are currently vacant and don’t require relocation; that BHA is in the process of getting a relocation plan adopted/approved for the apartments that are currently occupied; and that all affected resident households will be offered right-sized public housing units and will get home buying support if they wish. Relocated households will also get priority when the 25 replacement units at Old Colony units are completed (likely early 2026). Asha also noted special grants through American Rescue Plan Act & Community Preservation Act which funds were used for the Franklin Field Elderly community gardens project and the revitalization of the Archdale playground. Additionally, the BHA has undertaken the installation of wireless access points at Franklin Field Elderly, Monsignor Powers, West Broadway, and Gallivan Development , to facilitate BHA's networking system that will provide access to the internet over the air, and enable the residents, task force and BHA's management offices to have “Wi-Fi” and is funded through the digital equity fund. An emergency roof project has also been undertaken at both the South Street and Archdale Developments. Lastly, the BHA has also completed a building envelope project at 122-128 & 130-138 Blue Hills Ave [scattered site portfolio (Chapter 705/756)]

3/ Presentation on Maintenance and Operations (State) – Victor Williams from BHA said that BHA had roughly 1800 state units, and 11,000 work orders. In addition to existing categories of emergency work orders, BHA was adding a new category of urgent work orders, similar to what HUD has in its new requirements—this would be items that need to be addressed relatively quickly to avoid health/safety risks (example of unprotected outlet within 6’ of water). BHA thinks it is important to keep 24-hour response, and new emphasis on getting back to customer service. Sometimes though there is only one operator during evening and night shifts, and answering service backup if operator overwhelmed and taking too long to respond. Implemented “One Call Now” system for robocalls/texts if there is a system-wide problem (such as an elevator or furnace out). Also new Work Order Touch phone app, where info can be instantly put into phone about work done, helping to improve quality control.

4/ Real Estate Development and Rental Assistance Demonstration (RAD) – Joe summarized developments that are in the RAD Addendum and other parts of the Annual Plan but welcomed follow up questions. He noted that since Jan. 2024, J.J. Carroll had been completed & reoccupied and now had accessible units and was part of 2Life’s broader Brighton elder housing campus. At Old Colony, Phases 4 and 5 should be complete by end of 2024, Phase 6 is underway and should complete by 2026, and there will be more units at the end than what BHA started with when the redevelopment process began in 2008. At Whittier, they are in final phase of the redevelopment, newly dubbed “Flat 9 at Whittier” (named for jazz chord, and connecting to some old community traditions). At Bunker Hill, the first new building (all affordable) should be complete by end of year, and Mayor Wu has announced a new initiative that will facilitate financing of the next new building, which will be the first Mixed Income building at the site. At Hailey, people at RAB meeting can see two new buildings going up which should be done by summer 2025; the new Anna Mae Cole Center is being built on the ground floor of one of those new buildings where it will overlook a new plaza between the two buildings. BHA has launched modernization work for the balance of site under a new model of comprehensive modernization under direct BHA construction management (without an outside developer partner). At Eva White, the RAD conversion is scheduled for the end of this year, with Castle Square Tenant Organization/Winn assuming control of the property and starting renovation work. At McCormack, expect to break ground on 1st building by end of year or early 2025. The new master redevelopment plan for the State-funded Faneuil Gardens site was recently approved by the City of Boston, and BHA and its developer are now seeking funding for Phase one. While things have been long delayed at St. Botolph, paperwork is being executed with the construction contractor with a plan to start work 2025. General theme of trying to do more in house, and build net new affordable housing, including Faircloth initiative. A number of graphics for particular sites were shared at the Future of the BHA event on Nov. 9th and can get out to people.

5/ Committee Reports

Budget – The Treasurer said that the Committee Report was someone else’s responsibility who was not present, but she provided a Treasurer’s Report, which was a summary of the bank statement activity for the period ending 10/31/24. Original balance was $24,783, and $657.00 was spent, with an ending balance of $24,126, and with various reimbursements for transportation, for food and sundries advanced for meetings/trainings. RAB members were reminded that reimbursement could be sought for travel on either T, The Ride, or mileage if driving car for RAB meetings and forms will be distributed again — requests must be for expenses incurred in last quarter. Mac noted that RAB will need to be trained on Travel Policy but this was not a good time for this, given Annual Plan, but perhaps early in the year before spring conferences where RAB would be picking people to attend.

Policy & Procedures (including bylaw amendment) – A RAB member reported that 3 Policy and Procedure Committee members (quorum) met on Zoom on 10/28, along with a few others (Leased Housing Chair Heather, Mac, Simone Layne from BHA), that he volunteered to serve as chair, and that they had considered several bylaw amendments which they recommended. Mac added that as to one of the bylaw amendments, John Kane of BHA had just identified some additional issues & other language changes that would be needed (moving away from requiring the LTO delegation form) and suggested tabling that, which was fine. The other amendment would provide that if there were more nominees in a RAB election than there were slots (as happened in 2016 and this year for Family PH), the nominees who didn’t make the cut would be kept in a reserve pool, and if there were later vacancies because members/alternates left, RAB would first contact those individuals to see if they still wanted to serve before opening things up generally. This bylaw amendment was moved, seconded, and adopted unanimously. A resident in the meeting who was in the reserve pool was asked if she wanted to move to one of the two open alternate positions, and she said she would. The Board approved adding her to the Board, and she will serve as family alternate #9.

6/ Unfinished/New Business, Announcements, Etc. - (a) *Location for RAB meetings.* Someone asked about moving the RAB meetings to a new location. It was noted that this was still being explored, but people had decided not to move meetings in the meantime (Annual Plan focus & holidays).

(b) *Email about RAB office*. There was discussion about an email from a RAB member that had gone out about the lock on the RAB office door & what was happening with the computer in the RAB office. Another RAB member asked if personal data on computer was safe. A third RAB member said he thought the email should not be a discussion item for the whole Board and more information should be obtained. The Treasurer said that she was doing her report from her own personal computer and could not see where that was an issue. She stated further that there were two computers in the RAB office — one was provided by the BHA, and anyone on the RAB could use that. The 2nd one had been intended exclusively for Treasurer’s use. The Treasurer had discovered that there was a password on the Treasurer’s computer that needed to be removed and a new password set up and she had unplugged that computer but otherwise it was in the office. She acknowledged that a new key code had been placed on the RAB office door but this was to safeguard against the unauthorized entries that people had complained of in the past. She stated that any RAB members who wished to could access the office but it would have to be through Shara Bubb of the BHA and there would be a record kept.  *[There was some unfortunate language used in the exchanges here as well as some references to past history of issues with computer in RAB office and a RAB Treasurer. There was also some debate about whether installing the keycard required RAB Board approval. Mac noted that there had been some discussion about access to the RAB office in Budget Committee notes from the transition period, prior to the new RAB and new RAB Budget Committee meeting.]*

7/ Evaluation – Some parts professional, others not. Too much focus on state PH (John noted that October meeting had focused on federal capital plan). People did not follow Ground Rules—phones were not silent, people had side conversations, and people were arguing like children. Need to give respect. Some of the items should have been handled off-line. One RAB member did a great job with tech/Zoom.