

Mansion in pricey Portsmouth offers affordable rent and a community

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PORTSMOUTH – The owner of a historic 1860 mansion that has been converted into an apartment building says he offers renters a “community with a mission.”

Robert Vaccaro is the owner of 411 Middle St., which he said helps fulfill a much-needed demand for affordable housing in downtown Portsmouth.

“I rent rooms in two of my larger apartments. I rent those rooms from between \$800 to \$1,000 a month,” he said during an interview Monday as he showed visitors around his historic building. “Where else can you live in a mansion like this and have all these amenities at that price in Portsmouth?”



Vaccaro described the historic building at a city Board of Adjustment meeting last week as “a residential community with intentions around personal development, mutual support, health and planet friendly living in a beautiful and well-maintained setting.”

“Our newer housemates especially embraced this mission,” he said. “They appreciate getting to know their fellow housemates in a beautiful community room and back porch.”

Vaccaro must limit the number of people who can use the porch and community rooms because of COVID-19. But during a non-COVID year everyone living there has access to both, he said.

The historic mansion also offers tenants access to “award-winning gardens” in the back of the property, according to Vaccaro’s lawyer, Bernie Pelech.

“It’s an absolute showpiece,” Pelech said about the grounds.



The historic mansion features a variety of “eco-friendly tools,” including “inner and outdoor clothes lines, 61 solar panels, our new wood pellet boiler for heat and hot water” and plenty of room for bike storage, Vaccaro said.

Portsmouth inspection ruling: 'not in compliance'

The longtime owner of the property had to appear before the Board of Adjustment following a city inspection of his property late last year.

The city launched the inspection after receiving a complaint from a former tenant, city officials said.

City officials determined that 411 Middle St. “was not in compliance with the city’s zoning regulations,” according to City Staff Attorney Trevor McCourt.

“Mr. Vaccaro is working hard to bring it into compliance,” McCourt said during an interview Monday.

The Board of Adjustment in 2001 granted variances to allow six dwelling units in the building, according to McCourt.

But at the time of the city inspection, there were tenants living in eight apartments there, McCourt said.

Vaccaro then applied for and received unanimous approval from the board last week for a special exception to add two more apartments in the building.

The board granted the approval with the stipulation that Vaccaro receive a Conditional Use Permit for parking from the Planning Board, McCourt said.

The Planning Board meeting is scheduled for later this month, Vaccaro said.

Two of the existing eight apartments are now vacant, Pelech said during last week's meeting.

In order to rent out the two additional apartments, Vaccaro has to install a sprinkler system in the building, something he's agreed to do, he said Monday.

"We're going ahead with that, but you are going to see the pipes all over the place," Vaccaro said.



The city inspection also identified other code-related issues at the property, according to McCourt and City Attorney Robert Sullivan.

McCourt stated that there hasn't been an inspection of the property for "many, many years," but stressed the issues they found "were not because of a lack of maintenance but the need to bring the building into compliance with current codes."

Sullivan added that “in terms of aesthetics alone, it’s a lovely building.”

Vaccaro acknowledged during last summer he had rented out a couple of tents on the property.

“The city told us that’s not something we can do in the future,” Vaccaro said.

The Board of Adjustment received many letters in support of Vaccaro’s request last week for the special exception, something Pelech noted when he addressed the board.

“In 40 some odd years of practicing law and coming before the boards, in particular the zoning board in Portsmouth, I don’t recall ever seeing as many letters in support of an application,” Pelech said. “That’s a testament to Bob Vaccaro’s standing in the neighborhood and what he has done.”

Residents praise 'intentional community'

Sarah Clark, who lives in the historic building, told board members she moved back to New Hampshire this past summer to be closer to her family.

She was delighted, she said in a letter to the board, when she saw a “gorgeous intentional community right in the town where I was moving.”

“I have been so impressed with 411 and am the happiest here I’ve been in any living situation,” she said.



During last week's Zoom BOA meeting, Nicole Owen, another building resident, said both she and her fiancé live at 411 Middle and are traveling nurses.

"We've been able to serve the New England area and New Hampshire because of the living situation we've been provided at 411 Middle St.," she told the board. "As traveling nurses, I'm a long-term renter, and it's very difficult to find furnished apartments and furnished places available to rent in certain cities."

She's worked at Portsmouth Regional Hospital and other hospitals in the area during the pandemic, she said.

At the time of last week's meeting, there were 16 people living in the building, Pelech said.