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From abandoned school to artist workspace

Abandoned school's transformation complete

By Ian Benjamin, Troy/The Record

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ALBANY >> When artists begin moving into their apartment and workspaces at the Albany Barn later this month, it will be a major milestone in a roughly \$10 million project to transform an abandoned school into livable space.

St. Joseph's Academy, a former parochial school, was vacated by Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany about 40 years ago, after which time a boxing facility moved in, but they moved out of the building in the early 90s. "It was left to fall down around itself," said Ed Anker, secretary of the board of the Albany Barn and a consulting architect for the project, during a tour of the facility on Tuesday.

Until early last year, the building at 48 N. Swan St. — in the heart of the fraught Arbor Hill neighborhood — was vacant and deteriorating, but it is now in the midst of a renovation that has created 22 soon-to-be-occupied artist's apartments as well as a "creative incubator and community arts space," said Jeff Mirel, president of the Albany Barn, the organization spearheading the project.

Out of the former school's classrooms, the project architects have carved studio and single-bedroom apartments. Amenities include lofted beds, 14-foot ceilings, and attached workspaces. Those apartments have been rented to a range of artists, including sculptors, painters, photographers and musicians.

The 600 to 800 square-foot apartments rent for about \$600 month; however, much of that cost will be subsidized by Housing and Urban Development funds funneled through the Albany Housing Authority.

The tenants will have to contribute 30 percent of their gross monthly income or about \$50 a month, said Kirsten Hollen, executive director of the Albany Barn.

In a neighborhood long beset by high drug use, high rental volume, and deteriorating housing stock, the project is only the most recent revitalization effort, but Mirel has hope that it could spur more investment in the neighborhood.

"We hope the project down the street, while not a panacea, will be a catalyst for beginning to get people — both within the neighborhood as well as outside — to rethink what Swan Street is and what Arbor Hill is," said Mirel.

The project was largely funded by the state through grants from Restore New York, and a variety of other

sources, including private funding. Once the project is complete, the members of Albany Barn hope they will be able to purchase the building and continue to operate it as an affordable live/work for artists and as a community arts center.

National developer ArtSpace, which focuses on projects that promote the arts, was a consultant on the project.

A similar project has been proposed for 621 River St. in Troy, which the Missouri-based Vecino Group is seeking to acquire. They intend to create apartments and workspace for artists and recent college graduates.

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This article includes corrections not included in the version of this article that ran in print.

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