

6/19/2018 Brass City Charter School expanding | Republican-American

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Brass City Charter School expanding

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[HOME NEWS SPORTS ENTERTAINMENT LIFESTYLE OBITS OPINION COLUMNS BLOGS MARKETPLACE CLASSIFIEDS](#)

WATERBURY – Brass City Charter School Board of Trustees President Andy Sternlieb points toward the now-former St. Margaret of Scotland Church convent, which will house Brass City’s seventh and eighth grade classrooms and intervention rooms. That building is one of several that will undergo renovations this summer. Michael Gagne Republican-American

WATERBURY – The signs of construction – fencing, heavy equipment, demolished pavement – were present at the intersection of Willow and Ludlow streets.

The now former-St. Margaret of Scotland Roman Catholic church and its associated buildings will reopen next fall as Brass City Charter School’s renovated campus.

School officials and trustees – joined by other local dignitaries – celebrated an official groundbreaking ceremony Monday afternoon in the center of all the buildings. A few months from now, the ground on which they stood will be the school’s enclosed courtyard with new playscapes.

The school year ended last week for Brass City’s current 254 students. The school, which opened in 2013, will grow by more than 30 students, when it adds sixth grade next fall.

“By the church, in front of the convent, it will be a great new common area,” said Andy Sternlieb, chairman of the school’s board of trustees. “All of the buildings to some extent are being re-imagined.”

The altar and nave in the church building itself will become Brass City’s gymnasium and auditorium. The former hall in the church basement will be transformed into school’s performance space and classrooms. The former convent will house its seventh and eighth grade classrooms and intervention rooms. The church’s former rectory will house office and meeting rooms.

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“It’s been a long journey,” Sternlieb said, adding the Archdiocese of Hartford “has been as cooperative as they can be... in helping us close and get this done.”

Factoring in the costs of acquiring the buildings, architectural designs and renovations, the project’s total price tag will be around \$7.5 million. Part of that cost was covered by an \$850,000 facilities grant from the state Department of Education. The remainder will be covered by other financing and school equity, Sternlieb said.

“Here we are completing our fifth year as a charter, with our renewal in hand, and I can’t tell you how excited we are,” Barbara Ruggiero, the school’s executive director, told the crowd. “The kids will have music rooms, science labs, a gym and performance space. We’ll be able to house the school up to eighth grade. This is really a dream come true for everyone.”

“I just can’t wait for the kids to walk in and see the transformation,” she said.

The south side of the school will become its new entranceway, Sternlieb said.

He expects the project to be largely completed by September. “We may be doing some painting and patching, stuff like that here and there,” Sternlieb said.

He said Brass City is lucky, because “we had a space where we could grow into.”

Other charter schools don’t have a stable location as they’re growing their programs, he noted. “A lot of places jump around... They go into this church basement for two years, then they find another space. And they hop and hop around until they have the revenue to support a building,” Sternlieb said.

For state Rep. Geraldo Reyes Jr., D-75th district, the moment was both one to celebrate for the school, and to reflect on the site’s history.

Reyes noted the disappointment experienced by St. Margaret’s former congregants, and disillusionment still lingers over the process of the church’s sale earlier this year, in an agreement between the Archdiocese of Hartford and the school.

“They had a nice congregation here. They really did. A lot of them are now in the south end, at St. Anne’s,” Reyes said. “They’re coming. They’re participating, but they certainly miss their old home. It’s going to take time to grow into their new church.

“This church was thriving,” Reyes said, adding he believe the decision to close St. Margaret’s was “strategic and it was strategic to help the school.”

“I hope they’re going to be happy, and do good thing for their kids,” said Richard Corrigan, a longtime St. Margaret’s congregant who has been vocal in his opposition to the church’s sale. “I think it could have been handled a lot better,” he said

Reyes, meanwhile, sounded optimistic about Brass City Charter School’s future.

“I really believe in what Dr. Ruggiero is doing here in this school. This school here is unbelievable,” he said. “It’s a step in the right direction.”