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Catholic church transformed into charter school in Waterbury

BY MICHAEL GAGNE REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

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WATERBURY. 12 December 2018-121218SV21-The lunchroom at Brass City Charter School in the former St. Margaret's of Scotland Church in Waterbury Wednesday.Steven Valenti Republican-American

WATERBURY – There are still signs the parcel of land along Willow and Ludlow streets that is now Brass City Charter School's campus had been, until recently, a Roman Catholic parish.

The windows of the former St. Margaret of Scotland Church, now the space that serves as the school's auditorium and gymnasium, are still adorned with religious images.

The church's pews have been removed but are still being used in other areas. They now line the hallways of the parish's former school building, which houses grades pre-kindergarten to six. Meanwhile, the church's former altar, cross, statues and other religious objects have been removed.

The former convent has been outfitted with lockers to be use by the school's future seventh and eighth-graders in the next two years. The former rectory is now office space for the school.

Brass City Executive Director Barbara Ruggiero noted some other changes during recent walk through of the renovated spaces.

"We built out two music rooms," Ruggiero said during a walk through the former church basement, while third grade students played Ludwig Van Beethoven's famous "Ode To Joy" on stringed instruments.



WATERBURY. 12 December 2018-121218SV23-Music class at Brass City Charter School in the former St. Margaret's of Scotland Church in Waterbury Wednesday.Steven Valenti Republican-American

Overall, the renovation cost more than \$8 million, a figure that includes the \$1.04 million purchase price from the Archdiocese of Hartford, said Andy Sternlieb, who chairs the school's board of trustees.

Other costs included construction, architect fees and engineering. Most costs were covered by \$6.2 million in bonds from the Webster Public Finance Corporation and Boston Community Loan Fund. Others were covered by \$850,000 in state grant funding and other funds from private foundations, Sternlieb said.

Unexpected work included repairs to the former convent's roof, Ruggiero said.

Brass City became the city's first, and still only, charter school when it opened for the 2013-14 school year, first moving into the former St. Margaret's Parochial School. That year Brass City opened with 114 new pre-kindergarten-to-first-grade students. Now the school has 287 students enrolled, up to sixth grade, with a waitlist of an additional 450 students whose families had applied for enrollment but weren't selected via lottery.

In two years, when the current sixth-graders become eighth-graders, Brass City will be fully enrolled, with 355 students, officials said.

Mayor Neil M. O'Leary, while acknowledging he hasn't yet visited the property since the renovation's completion, spoke positively of the school, noting its emphasis on parental involvement, small class sizes and providing more resources for teachers as some of the reasons for the school's accomplishments as shown by recent years' results on statewide Smarter Balanced tests. Last spring more than 65.8 percent of Brass City students scored proficient or advanced on the SBAC English language arts test, while 66.7 percent of students achieved that level in mathematics.

Those percentages exceed statewide averages and those in the city's public school district, where 26.5 percent of district students achieved proficient or advanced in ELA and 19.2 percent in math.

"Their test scores have been above other charter schools in the state, which is a remarkable accomplishment in five years," O'Leary said.

"The charter school demonstrates if you have the resources and the leadership, a child will strive – that's why there's a waiting list," O'Leary said. "It certainly sets an example for all schools in city."

O'Leary acknowledged former St. Margaret's parishioners are saddened by their former church's closure. But some, he said, are comforted by the fact the church is now a school and "knowing children's lives are better."



WATERBURY. 12 December 2018-121218SV24-Student lineup for lunch in the lunchroom at Brass City Charter School in the former St. Margaret's of Scotland Church in Waterbury Wednesday. Steven Valenti Republican-American



WATERBURY. 12 December 2018-121218SV26-The gym and auditorium area of the Brass City Charter School in the former St. Margaret's of Scotland Church in Waterbury Wednesday. Steven Valenti Republican-American



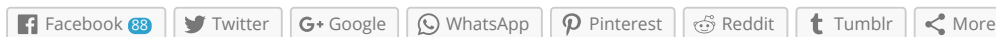
WATERBURY. 12 December 2018-121218SV25-The gym and auditorium area of the Brass City Charter School in the former St. Margaret's of Scotland Church in Waterbury Wednesday. Steven Valenti Republican-American

"You're never going to please everybody," O'Leary said. "There are still people who are bitter."

Richard Corrigan, who had been a life-long parishioner of the church before it closed, feels the "whole way the deal was made was a travesty against the people of St. Margaret's."

"We had no input. We had nothing to do with the deal," Corrigan said. "It was negotiated out of Hartford."

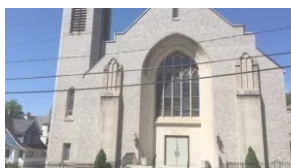
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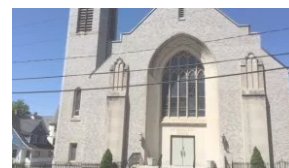
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