

MASSACHUSETTS

What's next for the historic Miramar Retreat and Conference Center in Duxbury?



Joanna K. Tzouvelis

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DUXBURY – Many residents in this seaside town known for its dairy farm, oysters and beach are wondering about the future of the Miramar Retreat and Conference Center.

Keller Williams Boston Metro’s O’Connor and Highland is listing the 30-acre property at 121 Parks St. for its most recently assessed value (\$8.2 million).

For 78 years, the property has been owned by the Society of the Divine Word, the world’s largest Catholic missionary organization. "Miramar," which means “see the sea” in Latin, was used by the society as a retreat center.

William Moody House: Historic Salisbury home is on the market for \$975,000

According to listing agent John O’Connor, Miramar is the only property the society owns in Massachusetts; most of its missionary work takes place in the Southern Hemisphere.

O’Connor said the society decided to close and sell in June 2022 because of ongoing financial concerns and a personnel shortage. Before the pandemic, the retreat center served many organizations, welcoming more than 6,000 annual visitors.

“The retreat center was a haven for spiritual seekers for generations,” said the Rev. Adam Oleszczuk, provincial superior of the Chicago Province, in a statement. “We are grateful for all who have worked, worshipped and studied at Miramar.”

About the property

The property contains three buildings, including a 27,155-square-foot main house built in 1900 and expanded in 1985. The house has 37 bedrooms with en suite bathrooms and a chapel that was originally used as a ballroom.

Next to the main house is a 4,824-square-foot community center, built in 1910 as a chauffeur's garage, according to the Massachusetts Historical Commission. It's made with poured concrete and has a playroom and a water tower that was used to pump water from ponds and wells. In 1985, it was expanded by the society to include five bedrooms with en suite bathrooms, as well as a two-bedroom apartment with 1½ bathrooms. It also has stables on the lower level.

The third property on the land is a 4,448-square-foot, four-bedroom home built in 2001. The society named it the Ford Center and used it for youth retreats.

How the property came to be owned by the world's largest Catholic missionary organization

The Wampanoag people originally used the land where Miramar now stands. They granted it to Myles Standish's military assistant, Lt. William Holmes, in 1627. In 1705, it was acquired by Thomas Loring, a descendant of the original settlers of Hull, O'Connor said.

Carolyn Ravenscroft, archivist and historian for the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society, said Miramar was once owned by the Loring family who had Bay Farm, a large dairy farm operated by Harrison Loring and his son, Atherton.

In 1943, Elizabeth Belknap owned the property, according to the Massachusetts Historical Commission. At that time, the typical Duxbury house was assessed for between \$2,000 and \$4,000. But the Belknap property was valued at \$30,000.

In 1945, Belknap sold the property to the society, which wanted to build a seminary. The society was established in 1875 and had owned the property across the street, now known as Bay Farm Condominiums, since 1922. In 1985, the society sold the property that would become Bay Farm and used the proceeds to improve the buildings at Miramar.

Architectural and Asian features influenced by society founder Arnaldo Janssen

The property contains some unique features. Laughing clown faces are carved into the exposed roof trusses of the cathedral ceiling inside what was once a children's playroom in the estate garage building (now a community center).

What was once the Loring summer house is a rare surviving example of an early 20th-century, shingle-style estate, according to the Massachusetts Historical Commission. It has a tiered stair hall window with a mix of clear, lavender and yellow glazing in its multilight fixed sash.

The staircase has an ironwork balustrade and a wood handrail. The floor-to-ceiling paneling of the living room walls is dark-stained English oak.

Various doors and cabinets are painted with Chinese and Scandinavian designs. The original dining room has beamed ceilings and a concrete fireplace encrusted by Chinese figurines and tiles. O'Connor said these Chinese features are present because when the society was founded in 1875, the goal of its founder, Arnaldo Janssen, was to evangelize in China, where early missions took place.

The tile floor of the chapel, once the home's ballroom, has another large multilight window with colored glass. The ceiling of the chapel has exposed wooden beams that look like the underside of a wooden boat.

Fate of the property

The property is not designated as a historical district, nor is it listed in the National Register of Historic Places. That means the next buyer could tear down any or all of the buildings, although they would have to wait a year due to Duxbury's demolition delay bylaw.

O'Connor said a variety of parties have expressed interest in Miramar since it came on the market Aug. 1. Religious organizations are looking at it, as well as affordable-housing developers, single-family home developers, charitable organizations and corporations.

Offers will be due the first or second week of November. An ad hoc committee for the society will analyze all offers with advisers and attorneys, then make a recommendation to the society's governing counsel.

O'Connor expects a decision by the end of the year.

Potential to build additional single-family residences

There are restrictions on what can be built on the property, based on zoning, O'Connor said.

The society wants the land to be respected by future owners. It has been used for many different ecumenical purposes, such as recovery groups and religious organizations.

The property contains two zoning overlays.

The northern third is zoned for residential compatible use. For instance, a developer could build five single-family homes, each containing an acre, O'Connor said.

The remaining two-thirds are zoned as planned development district one. That brings the potential for 21 additional single-family residences to be built, three of which would need to meet affordable housing requirements according to the zoning bylaws. With a special permit, there is scope for a retirement facility, a private club, an over-55 community or a residential conservation cluster development.

The land is not zoned for such uses as a hotel or manufacturing, O'Connor said.

Deed restrictions

The seller will request that certain deed restrictions run with the property regarding future use for 90 years, including prevention of abortion, sterilization, experimentation on human embryos, stem cell research, destruction of human embryos, human cloning, euthanasia, assisted suicide or death by means other than natural causes.

The seller will also not permit a facility where pornographic media is displayed, sold or rented; other adult entertainment offered such as an adult bookstore, X-rated movie theater, topless bar or similar establishment; tobacco or cannabis cultivation; or the sale of firearms.

History of similar land for sale

Stephen Dunn, Duxbury's director of assessing, said a recent sale in Duxbury that compares to Miramar was that of the Old Battelle facility at 401, 403, 405 and 397 Washington St. It sold for \$8 million in 2017 to Island Creek Oysters.

Maria Von Trapp and her family were invited to Miramar

O'Connor said Maria Von Trapp, of "The Sound of Music" fame, and her family were invited to stay at Miramar in the 1940s after World War II by the society director at the time, the Rev. Bruno Hagspiel.

The property contains two ponds and many gardens where weddings have taken place. A hill that slopes downward toward one of the ponds is popular for sledding during the winter, O'Connor said.

People also enjoy walking on the property's many trails, including one where the society has installed stations of the cross under cedar and pine trees.