

# Creative conversions provide housing for senior citizens

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 The Record

**METUCHEN** — Walk the halls of the Senior Residence at St. Peter the Apostle and you can see remnants of the convent that once was.

The modest-sized rooms hold only single beds. The round-topped design of some windows hints at the stained glass that once filled their frames. The former chapel transformed quite handily into a library/sitting room. An old confessional now serves as a medicine closet.

The nonprofit organization Build With Purpose opened this 24-room, boarding-home-style senior citizen residence in River Edge in 2013, the first of what it hopes will be many other converted buildings like it in New Jersey.

The mission is to find shuttered buildings that can convert easily into housing for the state's growing elderly population. The Metuchen-based nonprofit is already renovating another convent in Edison into a similar congregate home, and it has plans to open 100 new units of senior housing in 1,000 days, hoping to convert not only former convents but also decommissioned school buildings and some of the abandoned motels that line the Jersey Shore.

"We're looking for the kind of real estate that best lends itself to use as senior hous-

ing," Brian Keenan, president of Build with Purpose, told The Record.

Repurposing is the name this charity uses. But the strategy — also called adaptive re-use — is a trend that's recently taken hold in New Jersey, although it can sometimes face as many financing and bureaucratic hurdles as developing a vacant lot, affordable housing experts say.

In Montvale, United Way of Bergen County is transforming a long-shuttered school into a 10-apartment senior building, a renovation expected to cost \$1.6 million to \$2 million because the building's old classrooms are about the size needed for the one-bedroom apartments they are slated to become. Building from scratch could have cost more like \$3 million, and "this is certainly greener," said Tom Toronto, president of the organization.

Similarly, three Burlington County schools were converted into senior apartment buildings in the past few years by an ecumenical housing organization.

Affordable housing for seniors and others with special needs remains in high demand in North Jersey, with spaces often filling up before the buildings open and wait lists stretching several years long. Affordable housing developers often bemoan the

high cost of land and the lack of centrally located open spaces that are better suited to those in need of supportive services.

Transforming schools, convents and motels makes the most sense because the original buildings are often the right size and layout to convert into housing, Keenan said.

"Our mission is to find a new purpose for abandoned properties," Keenan said.

The organization spent \$1.1 million to renovate and convert St. Peter's convent into a senior building with 24 private bedrooms, shared bathrooms, a community dining room and a number of other shared-living spaces, such as the library, a television room, a sun room, front porch and a basement with a pool table. Building such a dwelling from scratch could have cost have \$5 million or more, Keenan estimates.

The decision to convert the convent into a shared-living space rather than carve it into separate apartments was made not only because it made architectural sense but also because Build with Purpose sees a need for a more diverse range of housing options for seniors, Keenan said.

While seniors in Bergen and Passaic counties might desire their own separate units, because they are accustomed to living on their own, Keenan believes their health and well-being might improve from being in a more communal setting, where residents can rely not only on each other but also the building's 24-hour-a-day staff.

