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Lab? Landmark? Conversion proposed for historic Fenway hotel

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Grant Welker

The former Hotel Buckminster in Boston's Kenmore Square shows wear and tear two years after it closed, including missing pieces of its sign.

Lab conversions in Boston are far from unprecedented. Turning a potential landmark into life sciences space? That's unusual.

But that's where IQHQ Inc. finds itself with the Hotel Buckminster property in Kenmore Square.

An affiliate of the California-based lab developer filed a letter of intent with the Boston Planning and Development Agency earlier this week to turn the hotel and adjacent sites on Beacon Street into a 215-foot-tall, 461,300-square-foot life sciences building. The plan is to demolish two buildings behind the former hotel to make way for new construction, which would "connect floor-to-floor" with the Hotel Buckminster, according to the letter.

The hotel "would be substantially renovated in connection with the redevelopment," IQHQ said in the filing. As is typical with letters of intent, there were few details. Those will come in another filing that IQHQ said it plans to make to the BPDA next month.

Three months ago, the Boston Preservation Alliance made a filing of its own related to the Hotel Buckminster: a petition to the Boston Landmarks Commission to designate the property as a landmark. The commission soon after labeled it a "pending landmark" for further study.

The alliance argues that the 126-year-old hotel, which shut down at the beginning of the pandemic, is historic for several reasons. Among those named in the petition: It was home to one of Boston's earliest radio stations beginning in the 1930s. It housed U.S. Army soldiers during World War II. Musician George Wein's "Storyville," known as Boston's "temple of jazz," operated there in the 1950s.

The petition does not mention it, but it is also believed that the infamous 1919 "Black Sox" scandal that rocked baseball was hatched in the hotel.

"There are so many stories to tell with this space. Not only that, but it's an anchor in the neighborhood," said Alison Frazee, the Boston Preservation Alliance's executive director. "For all of those reasons, we feel it's really important to be sensitive to this site."

An IQHQ representative could not be immediately reached for comment.

That's not to say Frazee and the alliance are against a new use for the hotel. According to Frazee, she met with representatives from IQHQ in September, where there was talk of the hotel's existing ceilings not being high enough for labs. She did not meet with the developer again prior to the letter of intent, but she said she hopes IQHQ will come to the Landmarks Commission voluntarily for an accelerated review of its plans.

Some properties can take years to become landmarks, though Frazee hopes the Hotel Buckminster review will be a matter of months. If it is named a landmark, it can still be altered, but proposed changes would go before the Landmarks Commission.

"We very rarely are trying to freeze a historic landmark in time," Frazee said. "We want buildings to be used. We want them to be relevant."

IQHQ bought the property in late 2021 for \$42.5 million, with plans to add it to its already-substantial Fenway presence. The company is developing the two-tower Fenway Center above the Massachusetts Turnpike with Meredith Management.

The developer has some recent experience trying to convert a beloved site into labs. Local musicians were outraged in December when they learned the Sound Museum rehearsal studio in Brighton would need to close by the end of January to make room for an IQHQ project. IQHQ acquired a nearby property to serve as a long-term replacement space for the musicians, though it is not close to being ready. A temporary rehearsal studio is being set up in Dorchester, with IQHQ agreeing to delay the Sound Museum's move-out date while that space is being prepared.

IQHQ's proposed Fenway project is the latest in a string of large lab proposals to be put forward in Boston in recent weeks.

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