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UMA opens first student residence, part of Stevens Common redevelopment

The public gets a first look at the University of Maine at Augusta’s first student residence, Stevens Hall, on Stevens Common in Hallowell. A ribbon-cutting was held Tuesday.

By Maureen Milliken

The University of Maine at Augusta has opened the first student residence in the college’s 54-year history, but it’s not on the Augusta campus.

The 36-student Stevens Hall is part of the developing mixed-use complex at Stevens Common in Hallowell, a 10-minute drive from the school.

"We’ve always been about access to higher education," said Sheri Fraser, dean of students, at a ribbon-cutting ceremony Tuesday. She said the new residence brings the school into "a new era of access and 24/7 operations."
The move is a win for both UMA and Mastway Development, of Hallowell, which will own the building and is leasing it to the college. Mastway, owned by Matt Morrill, bought the nine-building, 63-acre complex on Winthrop Street in Hallowell in 2015 for $215,000, and Stevens hall is the third building to be developed on the site.

More students looking at UMA

Students begin to move into the residence Thursday. Of the 36, 11 are from outside of Maine, including from Puerto Rico and France, Fraser said.

College President Rebecca Wyke said that the college has heard from students in recent years that safe, affordable off-campus housing is a major concern, and Stevens Hall is in response to that.

The college has historically been a commuter college, but increasingly, students have come from other places. They’ve found area lodging with help from UMA, but with a tight Augusta rental housing market, the residence will make things much easier, officials said.
Fraser and Jonathan Henry, UMA vice president of enrollment management and marketing, told Mainebiz that having school housing has increased interest in the college from students from outside the Augusta area, particularly in its architecture and aviation courses. UMA also has started a bachelor’s degree nursing program, with 80 students enrolled in the program this year.

Henry said of the 870 students entering UMA this fall, 25% are traditional students, and many students take online courses, rather than physically attend the Augusta campus.

Though the average age of students is 30, "we'll see that come down now," he said. "Now more students are looking at UMA."

College officials said they don’t think the commute between Stevens Hall on Winthrop Street in Hallowell to the campus, which is in north Augusta near the Civic Center, will be an issue for students. The trip, either by Interstate 95 from Exit 109 to Exit 112A, or through Augusta, takes 10 to 15 minutes.

Most of the students in the new dorm have their own transportation, but the school is also working with the Kennebec Explorer bus system and also looking at providing some kind of shuttle service, Fraser said.

Reuse of old campus

The Administration Building on Stevens Common in Hallowell, won a Maine Preservation ‘honor award last year; the Central Building, right, is being renovated into over-55 housing.
The site was once the State Industrial School for Girls, later renamed Stevens School, which closed in 1970. After that, it became state offices, but had largely been vacant for more than a decade when Morrill bought it three years ago. The state initially listed it for $1 million after moving state offices out in 2003, but it remained on the market until Morrill bought it.

Mastway Development did the renovation work and initially owned the nine buildings on the site. One was torn down to make way for the new Hallowell fire station; Morrill donated the land for the station.

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The 25,000-square-foot Central Building was bought by Community Housing of Maine in 2017, and is being renovated for use as senior apartments. The Portland-based organization is developing the building across the quad from Stevens Hall into 29 efficiency and one-bedroom senior apartments.

Community Housing, which is using Low Income Tax Credits through MaineHousing, has properties in the state that house more than 1,000 residents, ranging from historic renovations, like 28-unit Maine Hall at the former Bangor Theological Seminary to the 48-unit passive house Village Centre project in Brewer, which opened in 2016.

Besides the 18,000-square-foot Stevens Commons, Mastway also developed the Administration Building, a three-story clapboard building at the entrance to the complex, on Winthrop Street.

Morrill's first project, the 1905 building has been renovated into office space on the first floor, with market-rate apartments on the second and third floor. The renovation won an honor award from Maine Historic Preservation last year.

The Baker Building, a brick building facing Winthrop Street has also been developed into office space, with 13 tenants.

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The planning board last week also had an initial site review of plans for market-rate apartments in the Erskine building, by Landmark Corp., and Flagg-Dummer building, by Heritage Place LLC. Both renovations will be for market-rate apartments.
Besides the land for the fire station, Morill donated eight acres at the northern edge of the property to the city, which in turn donated it to the Kennebec Land Trust in 2018. The parcel, now the Effie L. Berry Conservation Area, links to Augusta’s 164-acre Howard Hill Preservation Area.

Much of the development of the project was made possible with city help, Morrill said, including infrastructure and road work funded with a Community Development Block Grant loan.

Morrill, who also owns Grand View Log and Timber Frames, of Winthrop, said that some city residents "were a little concerned at first" about the plans, and the city's involvement.

"But people were patient," he said. Now that they see some of the changes at the formerly dilapidated property, they seem to be coming around. "It's turning out really nice, and I think people are seeing that."
Getting in on the ground level

Morrill made use of Historic Preservation Tax Credits to redevelop Stevens Hall, which was built in 1936. The renovated interior includes one-, two- and three-person units. All units have their own kitchen and bathroom.

Large windows, wide hallways, and a lounge surrounded by three walls of windows on the third floor add to the ambiance.

He's looking for a restaurant tenant for cafe space in the basement, which will not only be for student dining, but also be open to the public. The space, in the basement, but with high ground-level windows, has been fitted up with a commercial kitchen.

Tuesday, dozens of area residents, school and city officials, and others ate finger foods in the soon-to-be cafe as part of the building tour.

Wyke, during the ribbon-cutting, said the foray into student housing is "a modest one," but opens the door for UMA looking at more housing solutions in the future.

The move by UMA is an exciting one for those involved, said Kim Kenniston, Stevens Hall's residence manager.

"It's fun to get in on the ground floor of something like this," said Kenniston, who previously worked at Colby College, and is a Hallowell native.
On Tuesday, Kenniston answered questions and gave visitors' tips on what to see in the new building.

"It's just great to be part of this," she said. "It's really exciting."