

# **Our Neighborhood, Our History**

**A response to the Lifebridge North Shore and  
Harborlight Homes expansion proposal**

SECOND EDITION | JUNE 2024

# CONTENTS

## Contents

INTRODUCTION ..... 1

    who we are ..... 1

    issues ..... 2

    how we got here ..... 2

    today ..... 5

CONCERNS: THE NEIGHBORHOOD ..... 7

    height and density ..... 7

    access, traffic, parking ..... 8

    environmental ..... 10

    the future: our neighborhood, their campus ..... 11

CONCERNS: LIFEBRIDGE AND HARBORLIGHT ..... 13

    the lifebridge/harborlight model ..... 13

    the lifebridge program ..... 14

CONCERNS: THE CITY ..... 16

    planning and development ..... 16

    costs to the city ..... 17

    safety ..... 18

    tourism ..... 19

CONCLUSION: WE CAN DO BETTER ..... 20

**NOTE**

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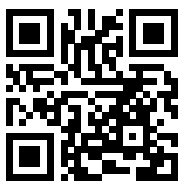
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# INTRODUCTION



Welcome to our neighborhood! Overview of Margin Street photographed Summer 2023.

## WHO WE ARE

Our Neighborhood, Our History (ONOH) is a subcommittee of the Greater Endicott Street Neighborhood Association (GESNA) of Salem, Massachusetts. It was formed in response to the Lifebridge North Shore and Harborlight Homes proposal to construct a series of new buildings in the area between Pratt, Endicott, Margin and High Streets. These would include a new and larger Lifebridge homeless shelter, offices for Lifebridge, retail space (Lifebridge Thrift Shop and Christopher Columbus Club social club/bar), and housing for the formerly homeless. ONOH has met privately several times a month, communicated with project developers, attended public forums, created conversations with local politicians and representatives from other neighborhoods, and studied various approaches to helping the unhoused around the country and the world.

**ONOH's goal has not been to prevent any development from happening, but to push for a plan that works in harmony with the neighborhood and the City in terms of its size and impacts.**

ONOH has also lobbied for better and more robust programming for the present and future clients of the project, including mental health counseling, job training, and other programming.

ONOH also sees the importance of creating or retaining uplifting interior and exterior spaces that better support Lifebridge clients in their goals.

Without a major increase in these types of services and spaces spread throughout the region, the project will concentrate and escalate the issue of homelessness in Salem — drawing more unhoused individuals to a single neighborhood and a single city, while leaving them without the resources to escape life

in Salem's streets and woods.

Lifebridge and Harborlight are following an outdated model. Newer models have been embraced by governmental agencies and many advocacy organizations in North America and Europe, shifting away from the idea that unhoused people need to “earn” housing. They reject the concept of building bigger shelters and “warehousing” people in large centralized institutional complexes. Instead, they take a more regional, less expensive approach, and more quickly settle people into real homes with access to expanded services. With a wealth of evidence of failed institutional models and with better ones available to study, why should the City sacrifice a neighborhood to build such a large segregated complex dedicated to an archaic concept?

## ISSUES

The current proposal — **overly tall, far too dense, encroaching on abutters** — was created by a developer from Beverly to make the numbers work for their bottom line. It requires a rezoning that would need approval by Salem's City Council. While this document will discuss ONOH's many issues with these plans, one of our most fundamental arguments is against sacrificing the quality of life of Salem's taxpaying homeowners and renters to accommodate the bottom line of a developer from another city who will not experience any first-hand effects of these issues. **As one neighbor stated, "At the end of the day, the officials and board members from Lifebridge and Harborlight drive home to the towns they live in, but we're stuck with what they've left behind."**

But the City's residents are not the only group at risk. The detrimental effects

of the current proposal will have a negative impact on the people served by Lifebridge, nearby business community, the tourism industry, and future investment (both residential and commercial) in the downtown district as well as the Riley Plaza area. We fail to see the logic in that, or how it will benefit Salem's citizens.

**We are also concerned by the many indications that the scope of this project will expand in coming years to consume other nearby parcels.** In fact, the project's plans have already recently expanded to include additional buildings on Endicott and High streets. Expansion will draw more clients, creating demand for even more beds and units. The current Lifebridge/Harborlight model concentrates all these needs at one location in the heart of our community.

The greater question for our neighborhood, the downtown, and the City is this: What are the implications for other

vulnerable populations who would also benefit from a central downtown location? The elderly, displaced families, and the disabled are all especially at risk from a larger population of individuals suffering from mental health and substance abuse challenges.

## HOW WE GOT HERE

Back when the harbor reached all the way to the foot of High Street, the neighborhood that GESNA encompasses was waterfront property. In the mid-19th century, it was home for abolitionists and notable members of Salem's Black community among others and, in fact, hosted Salem's first school for African-American children. After the Great Salem Fire of 1914, it was essentially reconstructed by an Italian-American community that



Archive photograph of the winding Creek Street block looking east, before demolition in the 1930s, St Mary's Italian Church is visible on the upper right, Norman Street is at the left and Summer Street is in the foreground.





St Mary's Italian Church served as a beloved venue for weddings, baptisms, and other community events.



The Christopher Columbus Society club and bar located at 24 Endicott Street.

had recently arrived at the turn of that century.

This neighborhood has long been victim to the whims of people with money, power, and shifting well-meaning missions. Ironically, while it is now in the crosshairs of a push for more housing, back in the 1930s over a hundred affordable neighborhood apartments were demolished. The area between Norman and Gedney Streets was once split down the middle by Creek Street and included over 50 two- and three-story tenement homes. That part of our neighborhood was leveled, and those families displaced with the decision to build the Salem Post Office and Holyoke Insurance buildings.

**St Mary's Italian Church** was funded and built in 1925 by the Italian-American community, which by that point was well entrenched in the surrounding streets. St Mary's stands on Margin Street at the entrance of the neighborhood and for over 75 years was the heart of the community. The church, a replica of one from Assisi, Italy, was filled with statues, murals painted by visiting Italian artists, walls and altars made of imported Italian marble, as well as hundreds of dedication plaques with local family names. In 1957, a Youth Center was built to the left of the church and a Grotto of Our Lady of Lourdes erected in a grassy area to the right, where neighborhood children sometimes uncovered arrowheads and other evidence of the area's original inhabitants.

Around the corner from the church, neighbors created a mutual-benefit society named The **Christopher Columbus Society** (CCS). The Society was formed to help Italian families in need with small amounts of financial assistance. The CCS building had an affordable function hall on its upper floor which hosted countless neighborhood gatherings. In its cellar, a smoky Christopher Columbus Club bar room became a favorite hangout for many a neighborhood dad. St Mary's and the CCS worked in a sort of discordant harmony, catering to both the social and





ABOVE LEFT: Editorial cartoon from *The Salem News*, 2009. RIGHT: Photograph of removed murals at St Mary's, 2012.

religious needs of the Italian-American community.

In January of 2003, facing a financial crisis over its handling of abusive priests, the Archdiocese of Boston decided to close St Mary's Italian as part of a larger plan to consolidate parishes. The closing of St Mary's and the seizing of its bank accounts caused great consternation among the church's parishioners since they had paid for it, built it, cared for it, and filled it with art and dedications to loved ones. The church was also still well attended and thriving financially. The following video records the history of the church and its connection to the neighborhood against the backdrop of its final Mass: (<https://vimeo.com/showcase/9538939/video/799896427>).

In 2004, Lifebridge, formerly known as the Salem Mission, purchased St Mary's from the Archdiocese of Boston along with its Youth Center and two apartment buildings on Endicott and High Streets that were also owned by the parish. Upon taking over the properties, the Salem Mission began utilizing the church's Youth Center as its main headquarters with offices and a kitchen on the main floor and approximately 40 shelter beds (later expanded to 50) in the basement. The apartment buildings on High Street and on the corner of Endicott and Margin became

permanent tiny Single Room Occupancy (SRO) units for 22 formerly homeless individuals.

At an initial meeting with former St Mary's parishioners and neighbors, the President of the Salem Mission — which was a religious nonprofit at the time — reassured the community that the church would always remain a church and that “nobody will be sleeping in the church.” Less than two years later, he noted that the model for the Mission's future was based on successes in Quincy; **he failed to mention that Quincy's shelter was located in an industrial area, not between a dense neighborhood and a city civic center.**

For a period, non-Catholic Christian religious services were held in the beautiful upper hall of the de-commissioned church while a Thrift Shop was run out of its first floor. After several years the church services were halted, and the Thrift Shop moved to a location on Canal Street with more space and dedicated parking. Only five years after promising to keep the building as a church, the same Salem Mission President proposed that the building be converted to housing. Neighbors and their supporters rallied to try to stop the conversion and save the integrity of the building. When anticipated funding for the Lifebridge housing plan never materialized, the

plan was dropped, and the church was listed for sale.

During this period, neighbors pushed Lifebridge for representation on their Board of Directors so residents could be part of future decisions impacting the neighborhood. At a Salem City Council Meeting of the Whole, Lifebridge promised the neighborhood just such a seat, “They'll be on the inside, they'll know what we're talking about, and they can communicate with the neighbors.” This still unfulfilled promise was captured in this video clip by SATV, Vimeo link: <https://vimeo.com/groups/71125/videos/7579780>.

A neighborhood-backed group created a nonprofit named Salem Community Arts Center to raise funds to purchase and convert the church into an arts and cultural space, but in 2012 Lifebridge decided instead to sell the building to The Gateways of Peace to the Nations Apostolic Ministries. Within a day of taking ownership, this Pentecostal congregation had taken sledgehammers to the marble altars and statues and torn down or painted over the church's murals. Several years later, the congregation failed to maintain mortgage payments and Lifebridge bought back the building.

# TODAY

By 2023, the Lifebridge shelter no longer met standards required by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. The tightly situated beds required more spacing as well as physical separations. Lifebridge also wanted to add 10 additional shelter beds, update its kitchen and Day Center, create more space for offices that were situated a few blocks away from the facility, and move its Thrift Shop back to Margin Street. Lifebridge decided to partner on a plan with Harborlight Homes — a local nonprofit developer based in Beverly specializing in the creation of low-income and elderly housing projects.

**Likely in 2022, Harborlight and Lifebridge began private meetings** with Salem Mayor Kimberley Driscoll (now the state's Lt. Governor) and City Councillors to discuss and show plans for a proposed development. In January of 2023, some GESNA members became aware that there was a plan afoot. Word got back to Lifebridge that neighbors wanted to know what was happening. On February 20, 2023, five members of GESNA along with City Councillors Caroline Watson-Felt and Patricia Morsillo were called to a meeting and shown updated plans for a massive expansion of Lifebridge in concert with Harborlight. The project had grown far beyond Lifebridge's original need for an updated shelter.

**The 2023 version of the expansion plan presented to GESNA suggested bulldozing St Mary's Italian Church and Youth Center and erecting two five-story buildings on those lots** — one for an updated Lifebridge shelter and the other for Harborlight housing. It also included an imposing four-story housing complex for seniors that would take over the neighborhood's High Street Playground, eliminate valued heritage trees, and sit less than 20 yards across from the two- and three-story homes that border the park on tiny Pratt Street. The plan proposed the purchase and demolition of the Christopher Columbus



TOP: Initial Lifebridge and Harborlight expansion plans as presented to some GESNA members in February 2023 shows two buildings, as viewed from Endicott Street with Pratt Street visible along the left side and new housing built atop High Street Playground. BOTTOM: Expansion plans dated February 2024, show connected buildings run the entire length of Margin Street from Endicott Street to High Street.

Society building on Endicott Street, the creation of a smaller new park on that site, and the relocation of the Columbus Club's bar room on the first floor of the new homeless shelter. This suggested a situation where people in recovery would be sheltered directly above a bar known to advertise the "cheapest beer in town." These plans were so far-reaching that they mobilized GESNA to create ONOH.

**The project has undergone several radical shifts since that proposal.** The newest version, dated February 2024 and

quietly released in April 2024, no longer includes construction on the playground — an idea that was dropped because of stiff resistance and the unlikelihood the Commonwealth would vote unanimously to approve the elimination of a city park. But it does show a substantially larger building than even the previous proposals.

**The February 2024 expansion proposal provides 68 units of SRO housing and 76 adult shelter beds at Margin Street; a notation indicates the**





An overhead photograph from Summer 2023 shows the current height of the buildings. The February 2024 drawings indicate that the Christopher Columbus Society Building and corner apartment block (foreground) and former Youth Center will be replaced with a new block at the height of the church roof peak. The January 2024 proposal was even higher.

**10 SRO housing units will remain on High Street.** The current plans include a four-story housing edifice for Margin Street on the spot where the one-and-a-half-story shelter now stands. This would become the most prominent building on the block, overshadowing the church and all neighboring structures, and would include the 68 SRO housing units as well as the thrift shop. **The building would extend completely around to Endicott Street, replacing the brick structure currently on the corner of Endicott, as well as the Christopher Columbus Society building and its courtyard.**

This February 2024 version envisions the expanded shelter moving to three- and four-story buildings on either side of the church building, as well as inside the church itself. The two-story brick building on the corner of High Street

would be demolished, and the complex would continue up High Street into the neighborhood. Only the church façade is retained, and the spirit of its grand upstairs hall with its tall windows is sacrificed for a windowless space accommodating shelter beds. The presence of the church itself, as part of the neighborhood and the downtown cityscape is swallowed by glass wings added to either side of the church. The wings serve to connect all the properties and form a continuous block of buildings without driveways, green space, or any significant open space.

The church is the most significant reminder of the area's Italian American legacy. The only real additional evidence of that community can be found in the current courtyard of the Christopher Columbus Society: the church's former bell; a large plaque honoring World War

II parishioners killed in action; and a series of bricks and benches with the names of families and individuals from the neighborhood, many of whom are familiar for their contributions to the City. The Harborlight plans show no indication as to where these community artifacts will end up. Once again, Our Neighborhood and Our History are in danger of eradication.

**The presence of the church itself, as part of the neighborhood and the downtown cityscape, would be swallowed.**



# CONCERNS: THE NEIGHBORHOOD



TOP: Lifebridge and Harborlight February 2024 proposal showing Margin Street as a contiguous string of buildings; this rendering does not show entirety of building on Margin. BOTTOM: Photograph facing Margin taken May 2024 showing all four Lifebridge properties.

## HEIGHT AND DENSITY

A close look at the neighborhood reveals a microcosm of Salem's history, from some of the earliest structures in the city through the buildings that document the arrival and growth of an immigrant community. It is bounded by the kinds of significant brick structures that define New England cities: a school, a post office, and of course, a church.

**As with most church structures, St Mary's was conceived to be the highest**

**structure on a block that is the neighborhood's entryway.** It stands as the heart of the neighborhood with open space to its right (the Church's former grotto — now a Lifebridge garden) offering a breath of sky and greenery. The shorter Youth Center (now the Lifebridge shelter) sits to its left. There is ample alley/driveway space between these two buildings. As the neighborhood grading slopes up behind these structures, many of the heritage trees and two-and three-story homes on Pratt and Summer Streets are revealed in congregation with

the church. The pleasing effect is one of a church standing protectively in front of the homes of its parishioners.

Both the January 2024 and February 2024 renderings show no regard for the surrounding neighborhood. As the two images above demonstrate, the plan now envisions a continuous and connected wall of structures that span the entire block of Margin Street; note that the rendering fails to show the full width of the structure at the left or the Endicott Street extension, which would also be visible from Riley Plaza. Long-time

residents from this neighborhood have often felt disrespected by Lifebridge and the current plan is an embodiment of that feeling. Its overly-tall construction succeeds in encroaching, hiding, and turning its back on the residents who live there — many of whom are descendants of those who rebuilt the area from the ashes of the Great Salem Fire of 1914. The plan makes the neighborhood, its residents, and their various objections disappear.

The height of the buildings will block views and sunlight from homes on Pratt Street, the trees lining that street, and the High Street playground. Harborlight’s own renderings hint at just some of the shadow these buildings will cast. Limiting or banning new shadows, particularly on public parks, has long legitimacy in zoning law as an essential public good.

**The genesis of this project was Lifebridge’s need to spread out its shelter beds per new Commonwealth regulations.** This could still happen with neighborhood backing and with far less disturbance than currently planned. The project escalated when Harborlight was brought in to help Lifebridge develop the property. They saw the opportunity to build out the whole Margin Street block and parts of surrounding properties that Lifebridge didn’t control. The result has become an attempt to pack ten tons into a two-ton lot.

A close look at the proposed plans reveals that much of programmed space contributing to this excess height and volume is simply unnecessary or undesirable. The Thrift Shop makes no sense in this location in terms of deliveries and parking or from a business point of view. The proposed Columbus Club storefront bar is completely inappropriate, when so many of the Lifebridge/Harborlight guests and residents struggle with sobriety. Administrative offices, “workforce development” and “area” spaces appear to be

**It is not incumbent on the neighborhood to accept out-sized development to resolve a site’s financial challenges.**

programmatic placeholders for services and activities that can and in many cases, should, be located throughout the North Shore.

**Harborlight has stated that their financing structure, which relies on tax credits and subsidies and considerations such as “economy of scale” and “costs per unit,” can only work if they build close to 36 units. Now they propose 60.** To fit that number of units, they want to build high and dense. As the current R2 Zoning would not allow construction of this size, Harborlight has stated its desire to create a 40R Zoning overlay. It would be up to the Salem City Council to pass this overlay and permit the project at the planned height and density.

Developers need to make the numbers work for their bottom line. There is a way to solve the problem when

the numbers don’t add up — find a different location where they do. It is not incumbent on the neighborhood to accept out-sized

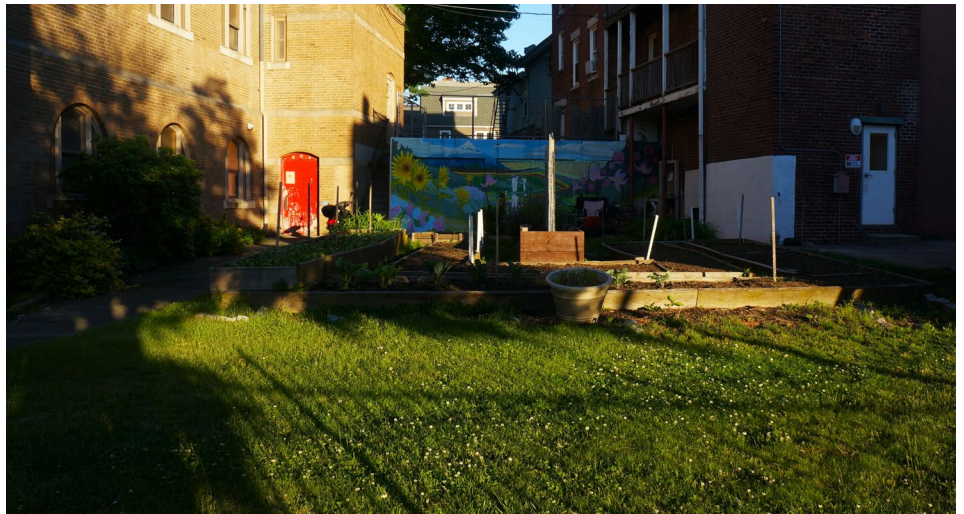
development to resolve a site’s financial challenges. Zoning rules were put in place to preserve the integrity of neighborhoods and protect the quality of life of residents. Zoning is intended to promote

beneficial development in appropriate districts. Such is not the case here. As representatives of those residents, City Councillors should not be in the business of changing zoning and making variances that negatively affect their constituents. They particularly should not breach the public trust by causing harm to their constituents in order to make a project more profitable for developers.

Salem residents, including residents of our neighborhood, have long supported efforts to provide housing for those in need. But residents should not have to make over-reaching sacrifices for the financial benefit of a developer or the charitable intentions of board members from surrounding towns that are not carrying their own load in terms of low-income housing or services for the unhoused. The fact that none of Harborlight’s major decision makers or Lifebridge’s board live in the neighborhood, or even the City, means they are pushing a block of ill-fitting buildings they will rarely look at and that will certainly not affect them.

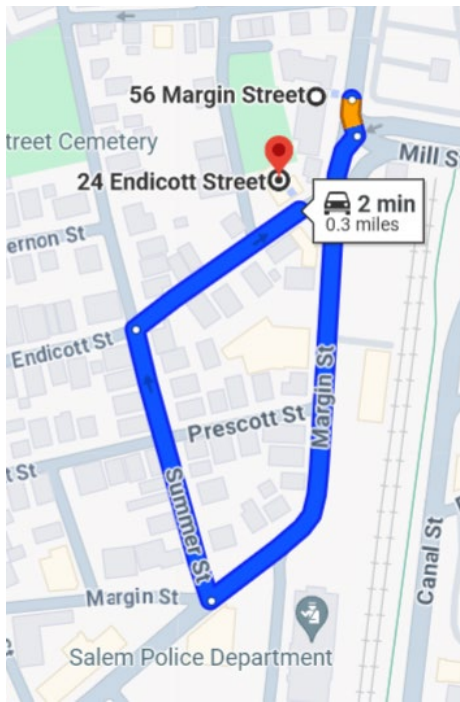
## ACCESS, TRAFFIC, PARKING

Limited access and a lack of parking spaces were among the major reasons Lifebridge moved its Thrift Shop to Canal



This photo from May 2024 shows the garden cared for by Lifebridge clients; none of the expansion proposals from Harborlight and Lifebridge include any green space.





LEFT: Street map indicating the legal street path vehicles have to follow to travel from 56 Margin Street to gain access to 24 Endicott Street; the February 2024 proposal does not include any vehicular access from Margin Street to the back of the buildings. RIGHT: A Lifebridge truck blocking access to the crosswalk on Margin Street.

Street well over a decade ago. Since then, Margin Street has become a significant byway for far greater levels of downtown and cut-through traffic. **The proposed development imposes an even larger traffic and parking burden but makes no attempt to solve the problems it creates.** Among our concerns are:

- **Shop deliveries.** As in the early days of the Thrift Shop, there is no provision for truck deliveries. But the greater public recognition of the Thrift Shop today also means that more drop-off vehicles and Lifebridge trucks will be double parked on Margin, contributing to the traffic and safety issues. In the past, donors regularly dropped bags of clothing and stashes of furniture on the sidewalk and steps of the church. There is little reason to think that will change. Once again, the front entrance of the neighborhood will look like a trash dump.
- **Food deliveries.** The Lifebridge kitchen will have frequent deliveries. The existing driveway between the church and shelter allows some pull-in

space, although delivery vehicles sometimes block the sidewalk. The proposed construction makes no provision for deliveries other than accessing the back of the new kitchen in the church building via a “Service Drive” on tiny High Street Court. This approach is impractical, since delivery trucks would become a major imposition and inconvenience for the residents of 9, 11, and 13 High Street.

- **Access.** Harborlight hopes to purchase the Christopher Columbus Society building at 24 Endicott Street. The January 2024 proposal indicates the site would become a parking lot; the February 2024 proposal indicates the site would house a ground-level garage for approximately 12 parking spaces in a new 4-story building. Driving to 24 Endicott from Margin Street is circular and inconvenient. To access it, visitors will have two choices: drive up High Street, down Pratt, and down Endicott; or follow Margin, take a right on Summer Street, and then a right

on Endicott. One can imagine that many people will instead take the few street spots now used by neighbors. Or, perhaps Harborlight will try to change the hard-fought one-way status of Endicott Street so people can turn right on Endicott from Margin for more convenient access to the lot. Neighbors have seen Lifebridge employees driving in the opposite direction of the one-way Endicott and Pratt streets to quickly access the parking lot next to High Street Playground. When one employee was approached by a neighbor about this he was told, “Mind your own business.”

**Neighborhood parking.** Parking in the neighborhood is already a nightmare, especially as most residents have no off-street parking. It is not unusual for Lifebridge vehicles, visitors, and clients (some of whom live in cars) to take up existing parking lot spaces as well as others on Endicott and Pratt Street. Lifebridge vehicles often block driveways and crosswalks on Margin Street. Hostility has ensued when the drivers have been asked to move. The new facility will include at



least 60 residents and an expanded workforce. Where will friends, visiting professionals, and medical personnel park?

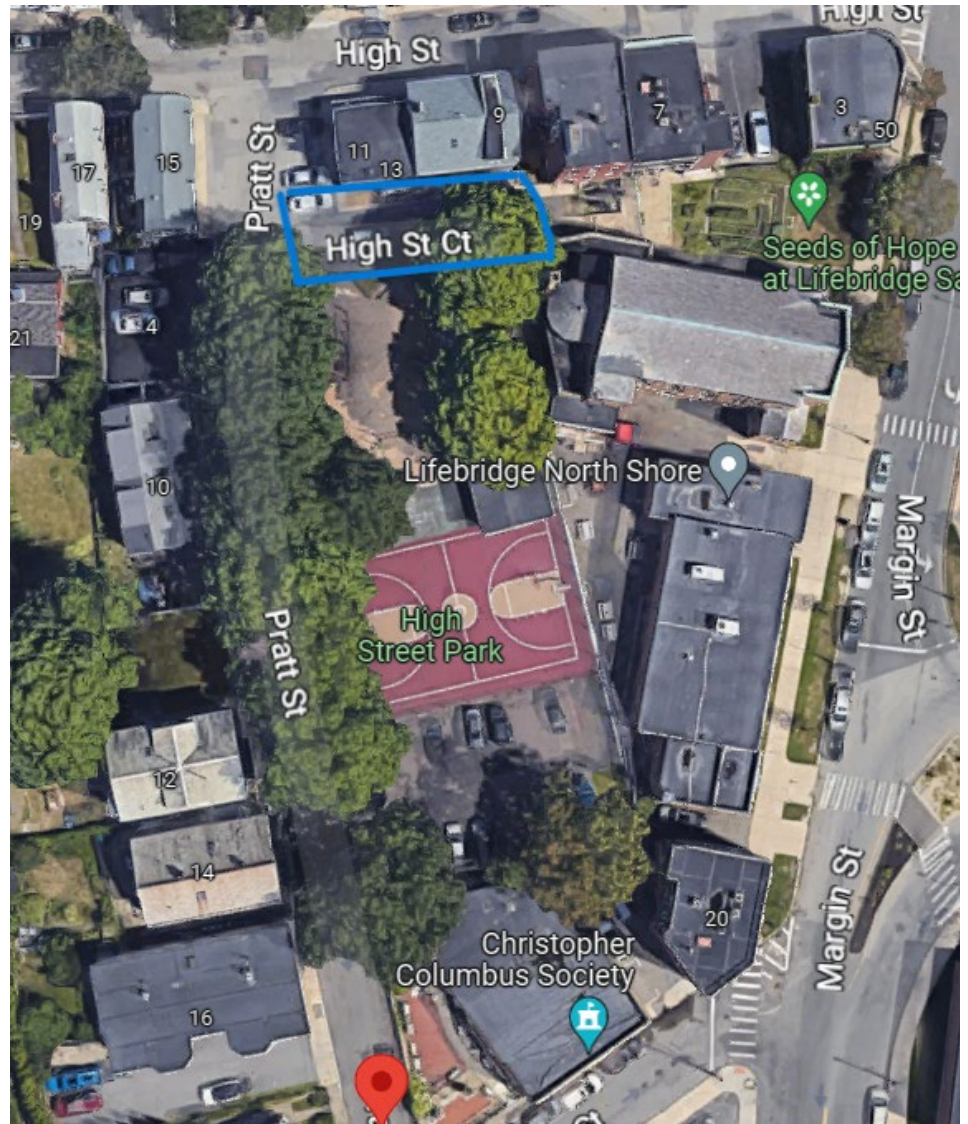
## ENVIRONMENTAL

Height and density concerns have already been noted, but they have additional environmental implications. In environmental terms, the height of the building would block air flow that acts as a natural coolant in warm months. The proposed height — especially with the recently added structure on Endicott Street — would also plunge the High Street Playground and Pratt Street homes into shadow. The playground is used by children from YMCA daycare as well as by children and teenagers from the immediate neighborhood and The Point. Residents of Pratt Street, who have enjoyed sunlight throughout the day, have a reasonable expectation for continued enjoyment of their homes; they should not be forced to give it up to benefit the needs of a developer.

The density of the project comes with other concerns, which have not been addressed by Harborlight or Lifebridge:

- Given the expected larger number of staff, new residents, and overnight guests, **what are the implications for existing city utilities such as the older water and sewer lines?** With more frequent, extreme weather events, how will stormwater runoff be handled in the area of the playground, especially with the retaining walls, areaways, and lightwells?

Current Lifebridge guests take advantage of its limited outdoor spaces, which are already inadequate and, with the exception of the garden, hard and inhospitable. **The proposed expansion removes those spaces**, providing solely a small “outdoor terrace” at the sidewalk, while increasing the number of guests and drawing a larger number to take



Bird's eye view of neighborhood indicating High Street Court highlighted with car blocking access.

advantage of services. This in turn will create new pressures on other City public spaces — the Margin Street sidewalk between Lifebridge and Steve's Market, nearby doorways and stoops, Riley Plaza, the downtown, the neighborhoods, and wooded areas — affecting tourism and the quality of life for others in the city. Even now, some city residents no longer feel comfortable or safe in beloved spaces such as Salem Woods, or even popular public ways such as the South River Walkway.

- Given the size and use of the proposed structures, **the new HVAC system will have an adverse impact on the High, Pratt, and Summer Street**

**neighbors**, who will be subject to emissions of heat and noise, as well as the odors of the commercial kitchen fans. Their higher elevation above the Margin Street site means that they will also contend with the unsightliness of any rooftop equipment, which will be in their line of sight.

- **Where would trash be stored** for the complex and how would it be accessed? Existing plans do not make this clear. Rats and skunks have been a neighborhood problem; we do not want to see this exacerbated by mismanagement of the enormous



amount of trash that will be generated by this huge project. What are the trash implications of the “lightwell” and areaways at the rear of the building?

- **What are the safety implications** of the areaways at the retaining walls behind the buildings and adjacent to the playground and parking lot? Dark and out of sight, these spaces invite illegal, even violent behavior. Even worse, the enclosed areaway behind the church could trap people fleeing a disaster through the fire stair.

Lifebridge as it exists now has not been a good neighbor. Its promises have been broken. Its buildings have not been well maintained. Its clients — including unhoused people it attracts but cannot or will not accommodate, and for whom it accepts no responsibility — have littered the neighborhood with nip bottles, trash, cigarette butts, drug paraphernalia, mattresses, and at times, human excrement. The aphorism “If you build it, they will come” is particularly apt here. But what happens when more unhoused people come to Salem, arriving with the expectation of meals, services, and housing and are either turned away or banned — or even refuse to stay in the facility?

## THE FUTURE: OUR NEIGHBORHOOD, THEIR CAMPUS

Scrutiny of the plans and careful attention to conversations and meetings indicate clearly that the current proposal is merely Phase One of an even larger plan for the neighborhood that Lifebridge has long considered its “campus.” If the Columbus Society building and the property on the corner of High Street are purchased, Harborlight and Lifebridge will then have control of all but three properties on the square block between High,

Margin, Endicott, and Pratt Streets. Over the years, owners of all those other properties have been approached by Lifebridge or Harborlight about purchasing their buildings. If the 40R zoning passes, it will set the stage for future developments on this square block and in nearby blocks. Considering that the size of this proposal has expanded in the last few months, one would imagine the Lifebridge/Harborlight will soon have their eyes set on Steve’s Market, Walsh Insurance, House of Pizza, and other surrounding neighborhood properties.

Because Lifebridge never fulfilled their promise to place a neighbor on its board, one is left only to imagine the scope of their future plans with Harborlight. While neighbors have coped with hosting a homeless shelter for 20 years, they are not keen on their neighborhood being defined as a homeless campus — an industry dictated by outside interests who have no real stakes in the area. Homeowners already relate stories of

people sleeping in their yards, cellars, and porches; finding human excrement; watching incidents of drug dealings and prostitution. High Street Playground is often littered with trash, needles, and nip bottles. Stories from other cities where larger shelters and SROs have been created offer fair warning about the likely effect here.

**Notably, Portland,**

**Maine, and Brockton, Massachusetts, have recently removed their shelters from downtown to industrial areas on the outskirts.**

All of this has come since the Salem Mission/Lifebridge acquired these properties. For the most part, other than occasional calls to police, the neighbors have quietly endured these issues. When these residents have spoken against this proposal, they have sometimes been labeled NIMBY (“Not In My Backyard”) by the expansion’s supporters and even some City Councillors. The irony is that these are the only Salem residents who can say they have a homeless shelter “AIMBY” — Already In My Backyard.



Harborlight Monopoly editorial cartoon by Johnny Naples, 2024.

**Homeowners already relate stories of people sleeping in their yards, cellars, and porches; finding human excrement; watching incidents of drug dealings and prostitution.**



ABOVE:View facing corner of Endicott and Margin Streets; the full Endicott frontage is not shown and would include three more apartment bays; proposal likely dated February 2024. BELOW: February 2024 proposed floor plans for the third and fourth floors; rendering shows connected buildings would wrap around both ends of Margin Street.



When the executive director of Lifebridge Jason Etheridge was asked how he would feel if he lived less than 20 yards from the 4-story building that was proposed, he replied, “I wouldn’t be happy.”

ONOH questions why one neighborhood needs to continue to carry the major burden of the region’s homeless crisis. Would the supporters of the project, the board members, and the management of Lifebridge or Harborlight accept this In Their Backyard? We know the answer. At the initial meeting with GESNA in 2023, when the development

plans were revealed, Jason Etheridge — the executive director of Lifebridge — was asked how he would feel if he lived on Pratt Street, less than 20 yards from the 4-story building that was proposed for High Street Playground. “I wouldn’t be happy,” he replied.

Echoing our own concerns, Ward 3 Councillor Morsillo wrote this in her

weekly newsletter of March 17, 2024: “We need more shelter beds regionally and more access to mental health services. Not just here in Salem, but really every community needs to provide services because every community sees homelessness.”



# CONCERNS: LIFEBRIDGE AND HARBORLIGHT



February 2024 proposal indicating Harborlight housing units in blue and Lifebridge adult shelter beds in brown on the second floor. Note this expansion proposal also indicates the “Lifebridge existing 10 units to remain” on High Street.

## THE LIFEBRIDGE/HARBORLIGHT MODEL

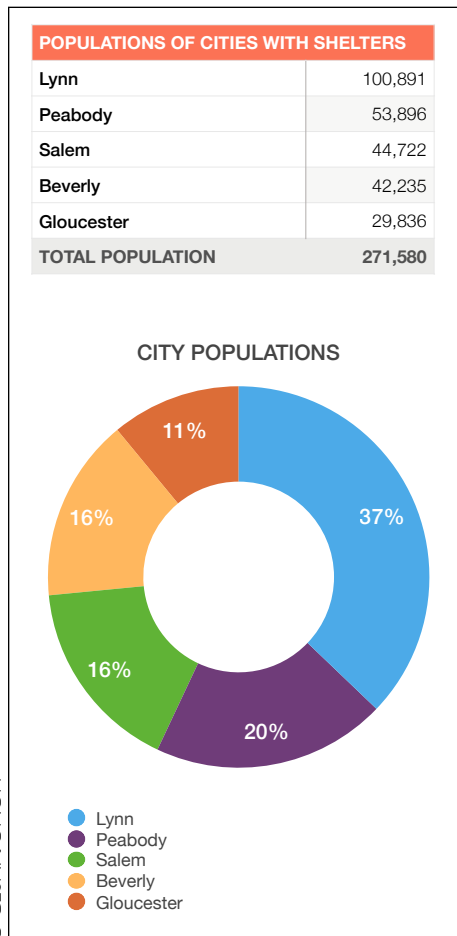
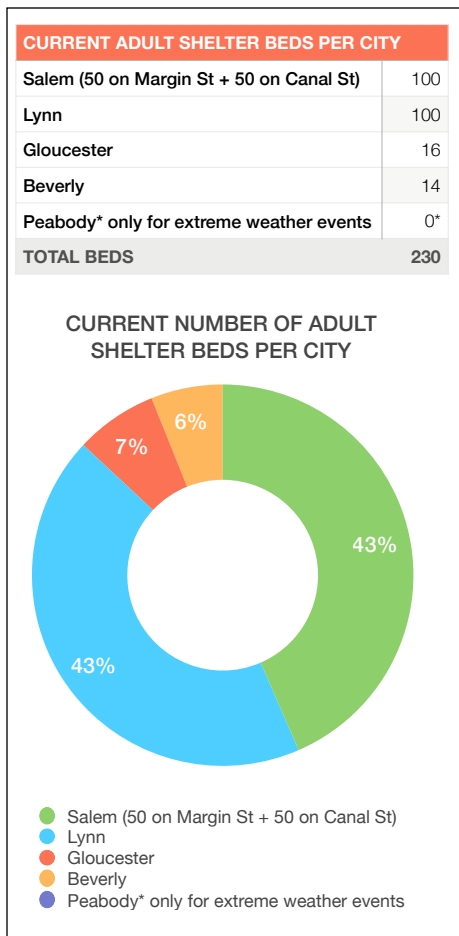
As already noted, Lifebridge and Harborlight are following an outdated model developed over 40 years ago. Known as “warehousing,” it is considered by most advocates for the homeless to be both ineffective and frequently inhumane. Newer strategies, including Housing First and Rapid Re-Housing, have been shown to be far more effective and continue to improve.

None of these programs are without controversies, and there is widespread confusion and inconsistency in their applications. Much like “greenwashing” in the environmental fields, Housing First programs sometimes claim credit for cutting-edge approaches while ignoring essential features such as decentralization and intensive services. But newer strategies are evolving, and there are certain to be even more effective approaches in the future. **Two things are clear: a concentration of functions in one location is not desirable, and access to intensive services and support is critical.** Even

now, neither Lifebridge nor Harborlight provides necessary services at a level remotely approaching the need.

On January 31, 2023, Jason Etheridge of Lifebridge stated, “We did 22 units of affordable housing and that was a lot for this organization.” (“Persons Experiencing Homelessness” meeting Link: <https://youtu.be/jGXAYS5qtc>)

We are also worried about the project’s financial implications for Lifebridge — and therefore, our neighborhood. Few organizations — corporations, institutions, or nonprofits — accurately predict all the budget implications of a



Source notes: Shelter bed counts based on telephone survey conducted in June 2024; City populations based on 2022 information from census.gov.

major physical expansion. **Lifefridge currently has extremely limited staff in a facility it fails to maintain.** In April 2024, it added 50 emergency shelter beds on Canal Street inside a former garage with a single co-ed bathroom for clients. How will Lifefridge handle this site, plus the 26 more beds it proposes to add to its current 50 on Margin Street? How will it manage the vastly greater operational costs of a much bigger facility: utilities, a more extensive HVAC system, maintenance, equipment, and security? How will it address the overhead of a larger administrative staff: managers, building operations, security, case workers, counselors, shop staff, and — crucially — development officers?

The funding for the ongoing social services has inherent uncertainty, whether from private or public sources. Salem will be left to pick up the pieces, and all of us in Salem will suffer as a result.

We should all be concerned that so many of the City's solutions to the crisis seem to have been built around faith in a single organization, one with limited means and capabilities facing even greater demands. As of April 2024, with

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a combined 100 beds on Margin Street and on Canal Street, this project makes Lifefridge the largest provider of shelter beds on the North Shore. Only three other communities on the North Shore offer permanent overnight shelter beds: Beverly (14 beds — also controlled by Lifefridge), Gloucester (16 beds), and Lynn (100 beds, even though it is more than twice Salem's population). Even

Peabody, our second-largest city, provides beds only for extreme weather events. Notably absent: Danvers, Swampscott, Marblehead, Beverly Farms, Ipswich, Topsfield, Hamilton, Wenham, Essex, Manchester, and Rockport.

Moreover, political leaders are buying into what is clearly a new corporate model for Lifefridge — centralizing its client services into a regional corporate headquarters in one neighborhood. This is exactly opposite from the current recommendations in the field, which recommend a decentralized approach that avoids segregation. Decentralization has resulted in higher success rates and lasting effects by reducing stigma and social trauma and allowing clients to maintain connections to family and community. A more forward-thinking model would create vehicles in each city and town to take on pieces of this problem and find real housing opportunities that would integrate and spread out the unhoused into all communities. Instead, political leaders are buying into a privatized Lifefridge/Harborlight model that would warehouse the region's homeless.

## THE LIFEFRIDGE PROGRAM

Among our concerns is the Lifefridge program itself. Staffing and services should not be within our purview, except they have a direct effect on the quality of the Lifefridge experience for its clients. **Lifefridge's failures become the City's problem.** This also means failures at Lifefridge become failures in the City's ability to tend to the welfare, safety, and quality of life of all its residents and business owners.

Lifefridge suffers from an alarming amount of staff turnover — not among higher-echelon administrators and development professionals, but among those who work most closely with clients, especially case managers. An examination of staffing over five dates from February





The South River walkway encampment behind Wendy's on Lafayette Street. Photograph taken late May 2024.

2023 through February 2024 reveals some startling reorganizations and a revolving door of staff. Our greatest concern is the changeover in case managers.

For much of 2023, Lifebridge provided only one case manager to handle the needs of its 22 permanent residents, 40 shelter clients, and all the “day clients” who visit the facility for daily meals. That single case manager also covered outreach to clients who live on the street and in the woods. Frequent new faces in these positions only compounds the problem with client relations.

Lifebridge has expanded its staff over the past few months. We, however, are skeptical for several reasons. Is this additional overhead sustainable, given Lifebridge's past staff and financial history, and the vulnerability of staffing levels to any kind of economic downturn? How will it handle the even greater staffing needs of a much larger facility? While we welcome a more robust service program, we also consider that the recent hiring boom is very possibly a temporary ploy in response to many of our earlier criticisms about service levels.

Unlike many Salem residents — and surely all or most of the Lifebridge and Harborlight boards — several GESNA

neighbors have come to know Lifebridge residents and clients. Conversations with them elicit complaints about a lack of information and direction supplied by Lifebridge employees — many of whom are untrained in the field. Discussions with some Lifebridge clients reveal their frustration: case workers who simply do not have sufficient time to deal with their needs. Many complain that there is no consistency in the institution's unpublished list of rules that have led to individuals being banned for periods of time ranging from one day to forever.

Chronically homeless individuals are most often people with untreated mental illness; major medical, physical, and intellectual disabilities; and/or active substance abuse issues — all of which prevent them from obtaining employment and housing. They need staff trained to help them with medical/psychological appointments, following doctor's plans, taking medications (unassisted people with these diagnoses have medication error rates over 95%),

and arranging transportation for services and appointments. It should be noted that two members of the Salem Police have individually estimated that there are approximately 25 Salem residents who fit this description now living in the shelter or on the streets.

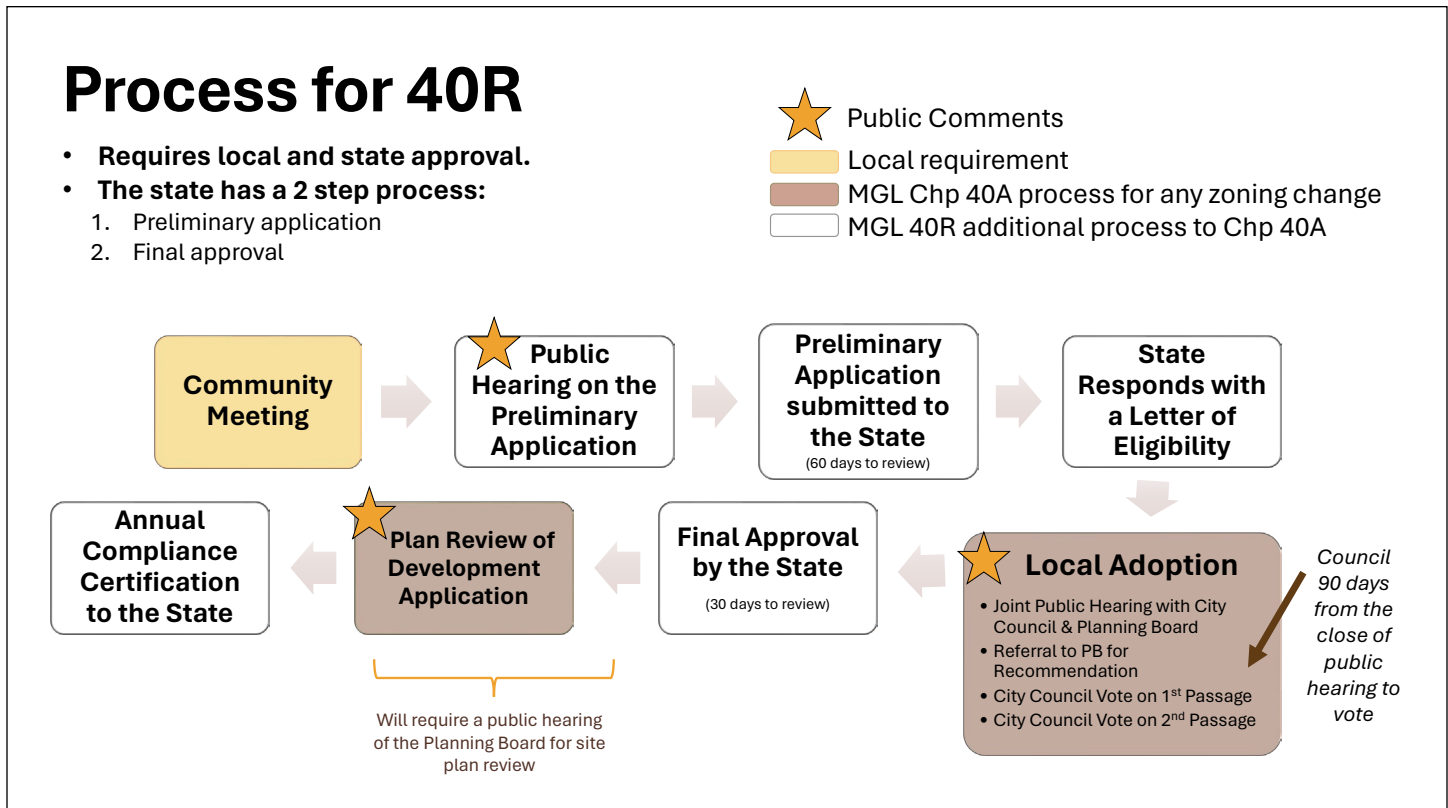
Advocates of the proposed development will say their primary goal is to get people off the streets. But the Lifebridge program presents a Faustian bargain that many unhoused individuals can't accept: the suppression of their dignity and the basic rights that many of us take for granted. At a public meeting in November 2023, Lifebridge said they intend to abridge the rights of people living in this project. They will not be allowed to have cars, pets, or partners. There will be “some rules” on curfews, drinking, drugs, parties, noise, visitors, and friends. Lifebridge will decide who can live in the project and will determine the rules for expulsion. The rationale for many of these is understandable. But also understandable is the fact that many unhoused people find such restrictions unacceptable and will make the same decision that many do now — to remain on the streets.

**For much of 2023, Lifebridge provided only one case manager to handle the needs of its 22 permanent residents, 40 shelter clients, and all the “day clients” who visit the facility for daily meals.**

Finally, we are concerned that plans for the shelter do not indicate the kinds of gender-separated space and accommodations that many social-service professionals advocate

to ensure the safety of female occupants, and to provide a sense of security to those women who might be victims of rape, abuse, trafficking, and other sexual trauma. It is possible that the facility will be men-only, which would raise issues of gender equity. If the shelter and housing is restricted to male clients, the City must consider the implications for the neighborhood and downtown in terms of greater incidents of aggression and assault.

# CONCERNS: THE CITY



A slide from the “Introduction to 40R & HDIP” presentation given to Salem City Council Committee of the Whole on May 16, 2024.

## PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Lifefridge and Harborlight propose the creation of a “Smart Growth Overlay District” under the Commonwealth’s Chapter 40R regulations in order to increase the height of the building, reduce parking to a minimum level, and eliminate what little open space currently exists. These regulations promote dense residential or mixed-use development by providing direct cash payments to municipalities that enact a 40R overlay district, and then bonus payments for each residential unit receiving a permit. The proposed 40R district must first receive approval from the Commonwealth and would then be enacted after a simple majority vote of the City Council and mayoral signature. The City would receive some one-time cash benefits.

These kinds of projects — combining the needs of the homeless and formerly homeless in a centralized facility — have been recently hailed as a solution to the housing crisis; they often also include SRO units. But such projects are already coming under scrutiny nationally with growing concern about their efficacy and the unintended consequences of developer involvement and continuing cost escalation.

The Lifefridge/Harborlight proposal is precisely the sort of project that is coming under the greatest criticism. It will concentrate all housing and activities for unhoused individuals into one economically and socially segregated neighborhood. Such neighborhoods subsequently lose their retail life and become further isolated. **As the editorial board of the Los Angeles Times warned on February 5, 2023, “having any neighborhood officially designated**

**for low-income people is akin to at least economic if not racial segregation.”** They speak from experience: LA has a history from the 1960s of “containment” — concentrating cheap hotels, shelters, and service agencies into one area (well known as Skid Row) to prevent them from setting up in other parts of the city. As the board noted, the policy “was born of a desire by leaders to help and also to wipe their hands of the misery there.” (Link to editorial: <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2023-02-05/skid-row-downtown-community-plan-affordable-housing>)

The Lifefridge/Harborlight proposal is promoting a similar kind of containment policy targeting a single city block for an entire region’s issues. Moreover, the segregation effects which the *Los Angeles Times* describes only increase the stigmas associated with homelessness and thwart



any future success for the residents who have been described as “in transition.” Social and behavioral pressures from shelter guests pull them back into old patterns. Just as bad, local employers, and landlords will quickly recognize the Margin Street address, just as locals recognize a police log report of a call to 56 Margin as a shelter incident. Lifebridge and Harborlight are extending a hand to the unhoused population only to tie a stone around their necks.

Salem’s “Housing Road Map” outlines some effective tools for promoting affordable housing to help combat homelessness. But it suffers from a glaring omission: its lack of social science insights in the development of “social housing” (housing built explicitly for a group of people with similar needs, such as the unhoused). When the housing more closely resembles a shelter than actual homes or apartments, it’s a shelter. (Salem’s “Housing Road Map” Link: [http://www.salemma.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlif12836/f/uploads/approved\\_housing\\_roadmap.pdf](http://www.salemma.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlif12836/f/uploads/approved_housing_roadmap.pdf))

All the incentives in the Housing Road Map are developer-oriented. They have little to do with matching a developer’s needs with the actual needs of neighborhoods or with the actual needs of the people Lifebridge and Harborlight purport to serve.

Foremost among those needs are services, including medication administration, mental health support, addiction

services, placement, and job counseling. The Department of Mental Health has funded community programs for similar individuals since the 1970s. Their contracts provide between 7 and 20 hours of case management for each individual each week.

The unintended consequences of the Housing Road Map SRO recommendations are yet another “warehousing”

strategy: they consign the well-being of this population to developers without social-science backgrounds, who are only in pursuit of “economies of scale.” The Lifebridge/Harborlight proposal for 60 new units and 26 extra shelter beds is severely lacking in the number of support personnel necessary to service it, nor has Lifebridge demonstrated the ability to provide them. **That is not an economy of scale — it is reckless understaffing.**

## COSTS TO THE CITY

**Because Lifebridge has made Salem its regional headquarters, Salem’s residents and businesses are already paying to solve what is a regional problem.**

While the City’s Health Department provides some services, the City’s website indicates that the Salem Police Department has taken a lead role in providing services including “additional mental health clinicians, substance use disorder specialists and peer recovery coaches, and outreach workers.” **Our Police and Fire Departments have become, in effect, Lifebridge’s subcontractors without the benefit of compensation — while providing a service to the entire region.**

From 2020 through 2023, the Community Impact Unit registered between 1,400 and 1,800 incidents a year (roughly 4 to 5 per day) involving homeless-related calls

for service. Each call strains our police and fire departments, not to mention the impact it has on an already overrun Salem Hospital Emergency Room and the availability of hospital beds.

The following are highlights of how our City is underwriting Lifebridge, according to a review of the City of Salem budgets from Fiscal Year 2021 through Fiscal Year 2024.

Annual homeless incidents	
2020 year	1,802 incidents
2021	1,448
2022	1,417
2023	1,620
Source: Salem Police Department	

People served by Lifebridge campus	
Margin Street shelter	50
Canal Street shelter	50
Endicott Street SRO residents	12
High Street SRO residents	10
TOTAL	122+
+plus daily meals for anybody who walks in	
Note: total as of May 2024	

- FY2024 budget: The City supported “Lifebridge Medical and Outreach support which provided 575 health assessments from September 2021 through February 2022 to 307 unique individuals.”
- FY2023 budget: The City provided “homeless day support and outreach during the pandemic with a \$11,960 grant award to Lifebridge to expand the day center from 3 days with one staff member, to 5 days with 2 staff members.”
- FY2022 budget: The Salem Police Department continued their “outreach programs with Peer Specialists, Homeless Outreach and Mental Health support. Timeline of 12 months within the \$30,000; Contracted Services budget.”
- FY2022 budget: The High Risk Homeless Task Force (HRHTF) “continued to address homeless-related issues in our community. The [Salem Police] Department’s Community Impact Unit, which has an embedded outreach worker and mental health clinician, works to identify high-risk homeless

individuals that are in need of treatment for substance abuse, mental health issues and/or have a dual diagnosis.”

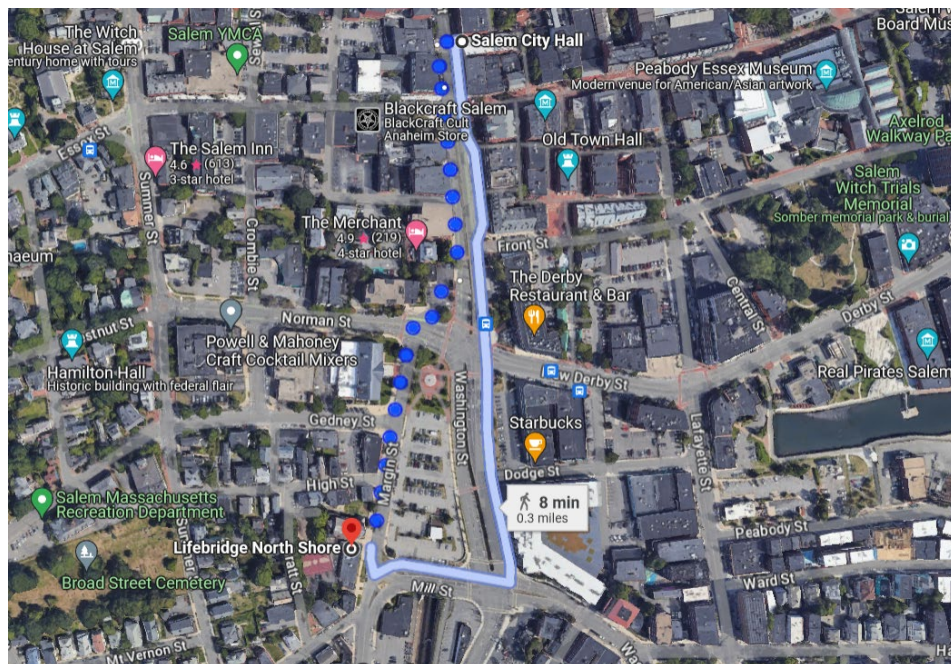
- FY2021 budget: The Salem Police Department, “through its Patrol Division and Community Impact Unit, continued its engagement with Lifebridge’s newly established Homeless Day Center by conducting daily drop-in visits and assistance with staffing.”
- During the pandemic: the Salem Police Department helped design, establish and maintain a temporary quarantine facility for homeless individuals from Salem and surrounding communities.

In terms of economic development, the scale of the proposed Lifebridge/Harborlight regional center could effectively block future economic development in the Riley Plaza/downtown area. It simultaneously decreases the options and the underlying value for all the adjacent commercial properties on the west and south sides of Riley Plaza, including Domino’s Pizza, Walsh Insurance, Salem House of Pizza, Steve’s Market, and the retail properties on Gedney. These owners may eventually have no option but to sell to Harborlight.

Incremental commercial investment will also be discouraged: the office, retail, and restaurant tenants who might otherwise occupy nearby properties. What happens to the City’s tax base when the value of those properties declines?

## SAFETY

On January 31, 2023, the vice president of Lifebridge Jonathan Lukens, PhD, stated that up to 75% of unhoused individuals have a mental health issue: anxiety disorders, depression, cyclothymic, ADHD, etc. Of that number, up to 30% have major depression, schizophrenia, or bipolar disorder. (Persons Expe-



Map showing proximity of the Lifebridge campus and the active downtown tourist area in relation to Salem City Hall.

riencing Homelessness” meeting Link:

<https://youtu.be/jGXAYsY5qtc>

**Building a massive facility in a single location and filling it with a vulnerable and challenged population puts them, and the surrounding neighborhood, at risk.**

In May of 2024, Salem enacted an anti-camping ordinance in response to the growing encampment of around two dozen tents along the South River. The intention is to remove the camp’s residents by providing them a space in a shelter, in Salem or within 15 miles of Salem.

**In April 2024, without notice to abutters, a new “overflow” shelter opened on the corner of Canal and Ropes Streets in a former garage building, next to the current Lifebridge Thrift Shop.** The Canal Street shelter offers 50 cots with a single co-ed bathroom for guests. It is a “come as you are” situation, mixing men and women, including couples. Some are people with serious mental health issues, some are high on drugs and alcohol, and others are simply down on their luck. It has been described by residents as “a nightmare” and “a shit show” — with police details frequently

called in. Ropes Street neighbors immediately started experiencing what Margin Street neighbors have become used to: defecation and urination in driveways and lawns; people peering in windows; arguments on the street; and a general feeling of being unsafe.

As one police officer told us, and other neighborhood associations, “adding 10 more beds will bring 40 more people looking for them.”

The tents near the South River were removed in April 2024, but within only a couple of weeks new encampment residents appeared, and 20 more tents were erected. The new inhabitants seem younger, more threatening, more on edge. Frequent arguments and fights have been witnessed. Drugs are being openly used. This reality supports the predictions that adding more shelter beds would only attract more people to the streets. The unhoused have clearly become more visible in and around downtown since the overflow shelter was created in April of 2024.

Residents of this new shelter make the journey and back to nearby Margin Street for meals. With little else to occupy their days, they spend afternoons



hanging out on Margin and Endicott, in the doorways of nearby buildings, and in Riley Plaza. For neighborhood residents heading to the Post Office or downtown via Margin, it is like walking a threatening gauntlet. It is a harbinger of things to come as the proposed expansion has even less outdoor area for clients to congregate.

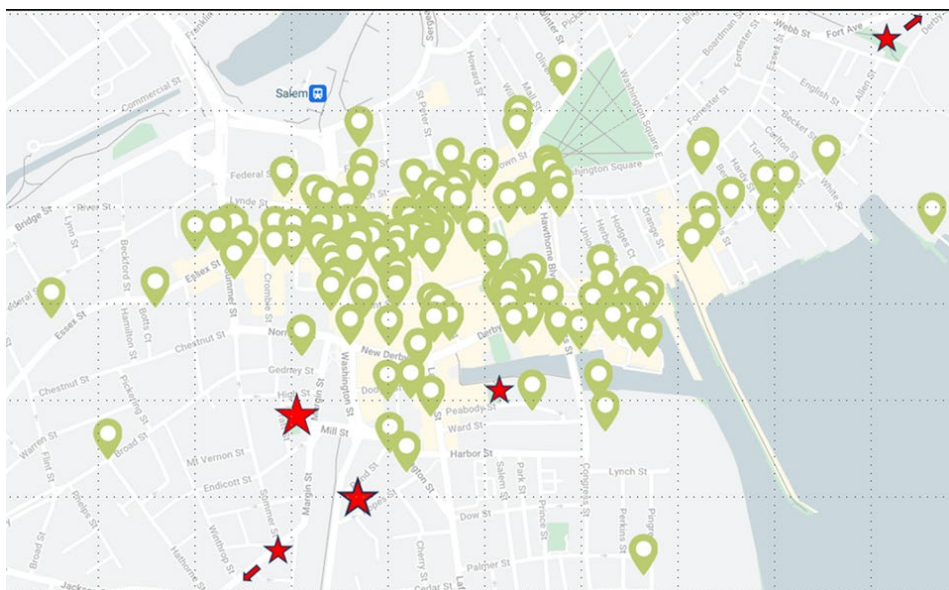
During the first weeks of May 2024, fights were observed in Steve's Market parking lot and sexual intercourse with a passed-out female was witnessed in the public walkway next to Domino's. In addition, an Endicott Street senior was assaulted in front of his house; he held his ground against two clients of Lifebridge who had been selling drugs for a couple weeks from a car in front of the Christopher Columbus Society. The assailants — both men with serious criminal records — were arrested but were back on Margin Street two days later.

**Salem taxpayers are pressed to fund our first responders who are addressing two shelter locations, multiple encampment sites, plus a busy downtown full of thousands of tourists and a train station.** And what is the future plan for the “overflow shelter” at Canal Street?

## TOURISM

**This neighborhood sits on the edge of Downtown Salem — the center of the City's tourism industry, which welcomes more than a million visitors a year.** The inability of Lifebridge to provide adequate services and to provide living conditions in which many of the unhoused population would choose to stay means an increasing presence of panhandlers, street sleepers, and encampments. It has become an uncomfortable mix where trouble is brewing. The expansion that is planned will likely attract even more people in need.

Even Lifebridge executive director Jason Etheridge recently told *The Boston Globe*, “But I’m not convinced if we find a solution for the 30 folks [at the



Map of downtown tourist sites as indicated with green arrows according to Destination Salem, plus the Lifebridge shelter locations on Margin Street and Canal Street indicated by large red stars and some of the encampments as indicated with smaller red stars.

encampment] it won’t be filled in by another 30 people.”

Some of us work in the businesses and cultural organizations of the tourism industry, a sector that the City has increasingly depended upon in the past few decades to sustain economic development and downtown vitality. Salem’s residents and business owners have roots here. Tourists have no such ties. Those businesses (including restaurants, coffee shops, and hotels) within sight of Lifebridge and the South River walkway encampment, are most vulnerable. It only takes a few stories on social media, a few bad reviews on TripAdvisor, and then a major media story about the “dark side of Halloween in Salem.” Just ask San Francisco.

The project’s location on Riley Plaza — our central civic space — is also a concern for the tourism industry, given the buildings’ (literally) high profile. The size and visibility are an intentional branding mechanism for both Lifebridge and Harborlight, as they endeavor to expand their monopoly in the shelter and affordable housing sector on the North Shore. Unfortunately, that high profile also brands our City.

When so many urban downtown

districts are struggling, are we willing to put one of our strongest economic engines at risk in order to satisfy the increasingly corporate interests of these two organizations?

**Even Lifebridge executive director Jason Etheridge recently told *The Boston Globe*, “But I’m not convinced if we find a solution for the 30 folks [at the encampment] it won’t be filled in by another 30 people.”**

# CONCLUSION: WE CAN DO BETTER



February 2024 proposal as seen from the corner of Margin and High Streets.

Not lost on us is the essential irony of those City leaders and other proponents who have shown indifference to our concerns — a historically African-American neighborhood resurrected by immigrants — even as they now champion Salem’s Black history and the needs and contributions of more recent immigrants to the City. Salem has always made a place for newcomers who have come here for a better life, often providing greater support and a warmer welcome than other nearby cities. We in the Greater Endicott Street Neighborhood understand the challenges that new residents face. Our parents and grandparents were part of the previous wave, also fighting discrimination as well as language and cultural hurdles, while raising families, building lives, and helping to build the City itself. Their stories are our stories. But there seems

to be an expiration date on empathy for immigrants and their families. Who will tell current immigrants that they, too, can eventually look forward to governmental and institutional indifference? Who will tell them that their clock is ticking?

**One small, modest-income neighborhood in one small, modest-income city must not be forced to carry the major burden of the region’s homeless crisis. Salem must do better — for the residents of this working-class neighborhood; for the entire city of taxpayers, voters, and business owners; and for unhoused people who deserve better than to be warehoused and all but guaranteed an extended cycle of life on the streets.**

**We can do better.**

For this to happen, we need City leadership to become proactive, to work

with the state to commit to a different vision: the creation of an interconnected, decentralized network of smaller shelters and housing units in all of the North Shore communities — even those where Lifebridge and Harborlight board members live.

We are Salem residents who want to see this city be the best it can be. Are we NIMBYs? No. Lifebridge is already in our back yard, and has been for 20 years. It hasn’t always been easy. But many of us know and have befriended Lifebridge clients. We help when we can. And we listen. It’s time for City leadership to listen, too.