

Longtime owners of Somerville's Central Street Studios set to sell to the Arts & Business Council of Greater Boston

Artist-tenants plan fundraisers to help defray estimated \$100,000 gap between \$1.8 million asking price and money raised so far

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Artists who work out of Central Street Studios in Somerville held a planning meeting Monday. The longtime owners of Central Street Studios are set to sell to the Arts & Business Council of Greater Boston, and the artists are planning fundraisers to help defray an estimated \$100,000 gap between the \$1.8 million asking price and the money raised so far. MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

To maintain affordable workspace for the creative community around Greater Boston, sometimes what's required is a bit of creative thinking.

The longtime owners of Somerville's Central Street Studios, a four-floor artists' building they have owned since 1983, are in the process of selling the space to the [Arts & Business Council \(A&BC\) of Greater Boston](#), which will put it in a trust. Some of the funding will come from the city of Somerville and the current tenants themselves.

It's an unusually productive collaboration, said Jim Grace, executive director of the A&BC, especially during a critical time for artists amid skyrocketing real-estate prices.

"It's a testament to what is possible when the different interested parties come together to preserve something," he said Monday.

Since the pandemic, when many renters moved out, the studio building has been repopulated by a young cohort of artists working in various media, including a couple who design video art installations, an illustrator who does live tattoo performances, and a maker who specializes in Popsicle-stick sculptures. Many of these newcomers have joined the building's tenants' association, which plans to hold fundraisers to help defray an estimated \$100,000 gap between the owners' asking price of \$1.8 million and the money raised by the city and the A&BC.

"As tenants, we feel we've done enough organizing amongst ourselves to be able to have a say in what we would like our leases to look like," said Lena Warnke, one of four female members of the art-rock folk punk band Sidebody who rent the basement level for rehearsals. The band, whose members also pursue vocations including printing, painting, photography, and performance art, has been invited to perform at this year's Boston Calling.

"It's been hugely collaborative," Warnke said about the transition process. "We feel listened to and attended to."



Artists at Central Street Studios in Somerville held a planning meeting Monday. MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

Paul and Karen Morse have owned the building in Somerville's Spring Hill neighborhood with two other partners, David Benson and Nancy Dutton, for more than 40 years. Morse is a lifelong cabinet maker; his wife is a fiber artist, working in weaving, sewing, and knitting.

Before they bought the building, Morse said, it cycled through several incarnations. There once was a candlepin-bowling alley in the basement. Beginning in the 1920s, the street level housed an A&P grocery store.

"We're very blessed with the energy in the building now," Morse said.

In a press release, Somerville Mayor Katjana Ballantyne said the city is "thrilled" that the various stakeholders "have the opportunity to secure the legacy of this unique creative community as part of our arts ecosystem. Somerville cares deeply about our artists, and we're proud to be able to help support this acquisition financially."

The city is also in the process of developing the [Somernova](#) campus, a hub for innovation and creativity, near Union Square.

About 40 artists occupy 30 or so spaces in the 6,600-square-foot property on Central Street. Beginning this week, the tenants will [launch an online fundraiser](#) toward their \$100,000 goal. On April 21, they will host an arts advocacy event and auction at the event space Warehouse XI in Union Square.

During a recent walk-through of the studios, several artists echoed how much the collaboration and support of their co-tenants has meant to them.

“This studio space has uplifted every part of my life,” said Janella Mele, the illustrator and tattoo artist. “I can’t stress enough how much these collaborations have evolved my ability to think and be.”

Zachary Stern has an open-door policy in his whimsical third-floor space, which he calls the “Imaginarium.” He invites friends and acquaintances to share his workshop and use the materials he’s amassed to make anything they can conceive.

He loved the community he joined while attending the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, he said. After he graduated, “I thought I was going to lose that.”

Now, with a studio space he can afford, “I feel like it’s kind of my duty” to share it, he said.

The ownership transfer at 57 Central St. is being facilitated with help from the team at [Art Stays Here](#), a volunteer coalition that has been [advocating for more affordable work space for artists](#) in and around Boston.

“This is the only project we’ve worked on that was semi-ready when the shoe dropped,” said Ami Bennitt, a co-founder of Art Stays Here. The Morses, she said, had been in conversation with the city for some time about finding a way to keep the building accessible to artists.

Prior to Central Street, the Arts & Business Council arranged two previous deals to ensure a future for affordable artist space: [Creative Hub Worcester](#) in that city; and, in Lowell, Western Avenue Studios, where 350 artists share a large former textile factory with a theater, gallery, brewery, and café.

Art “is an integral part of livable cities,” said Jim Grace. “And cities that get it invest in it. Once it’s gone, it’s hard to bring back.”

Paul Morse agrees. Artistry of all kinds, he said, “is critical to our well-being.

“There’s such an important role for artists,” he said. “And if the city can do anything to keep that momentum going, I think we’re so much better off.”

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