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A dorm with a view: New UMass Boston dormitory tower seen as symbol of new era on campus

By Jennifer Smith, News Editor
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*Interim Chancellor Katherine Newman looks out from the top of the new UMass Boston dormitory.
Jennifer Smith photo*

Katherine Newman looked across a gleaming Boston Harbor to where bright shipping crates led up to Castle Island; across the water nearby the pristine white of the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum sparkled in the sunlight. It was an enviable view from the new dormitory tower at UMass Boston on Columbia Point.

With the fall semester just weeks off, the university's interim chancellor, Newman, was taking in the scene before some 50 resident assistants move in with more than 1,000 of their new charges.

"This has to be the most beautiful view of any dorm in the world," she said during a tour of the building on a bright August afternoon. "I've never seen anything like it."

This is a moment of flux for the Dorchester campus, Newman knows, with the first-ever UMass Boston students to live in on-campus housing moving in on Sept. 2. The \$137.4 million, 260,000-square-foot residence hall rises seven stories across the building's entire footprint and leaps to 12 stories on a smaller tower.

"It's a statement about the campus having arrived at a degree of maturity and prominence that it would invest in this as such a permanent way of welcoming people and making them feel at home here," Newman said.



A view of the new dorms from the campus' Mt. Vernon Street entrance. Jennifer Smith photo

About 80 percent of the students in the residence halls are in-state students, said UMass Boston spokesman DeWayne Lehman. Nearly all, except for about 40 sophomores and the resident assistants, are freshmen.

"The thing I'm most proud of is that the campus put a huge amount of scholarship money into enabling students from a wide variety of economic backgrounds to live here," Newman said. "So, there's a very large proportion of students who are Pell grant recipients, who are generally the lowest income students that we have. And if that hadn't been the case, I'm not sure it would've been the

kind of the diverse community that it's going to be. But as a result of that investment, there are literally going to be students from all walks of life, international, domestic, students from low income households to students who are middle class. And that's kind of the essence of what you hope will happen in any university."

UMass Boston awarded \$1.4 million in Campus Living Grants to Pell eligible students, on top of their regular financial aid packages.

Running from about \$4,350 per student per semester for a four-person room with a private bathroom to \$5,450 for a double room with a private bathroom, the dormitories themselves are pristine.

Its 1,077 beds are split between rooms in single, double, triple, and quad combinations. Some have private bathrooms and showers, but for those that don't, unisex common bathrooms sit on each floor.



In the unisex shared bathrooms, private rooms with a toilet, a shower, or both surround a communal sink station and offer students a measure of privacy.

The top of the tower does not have a monopoly on the prime views -- waterfront and cityscapes are featured at almost every turn, from the larger common rooms on each floor to the floor-to-ceiling windows in the bedrooms themselves.

A seventh floor common room, which, like the others, includes a flat-screen television, a white board for communal work space, and a view of the city skyline.



The dormitories are almost complete, with just some finishing work left to do, said Ralph Wallace of the UMass Building Authority.

Ground floor meeting rooms and study pods near the dining hall can also be used by others on campus or by the neighborhood. Garage-door style glass panes can slide up or down to make room for functions in the rounded dining space after hours.



A 500-person dining hall on the first floor of the new residence hall will serve not only the students, but also the community, with its food stations ranging from to brick oven pizza, to vegan, allergen safe, and gluten free options.



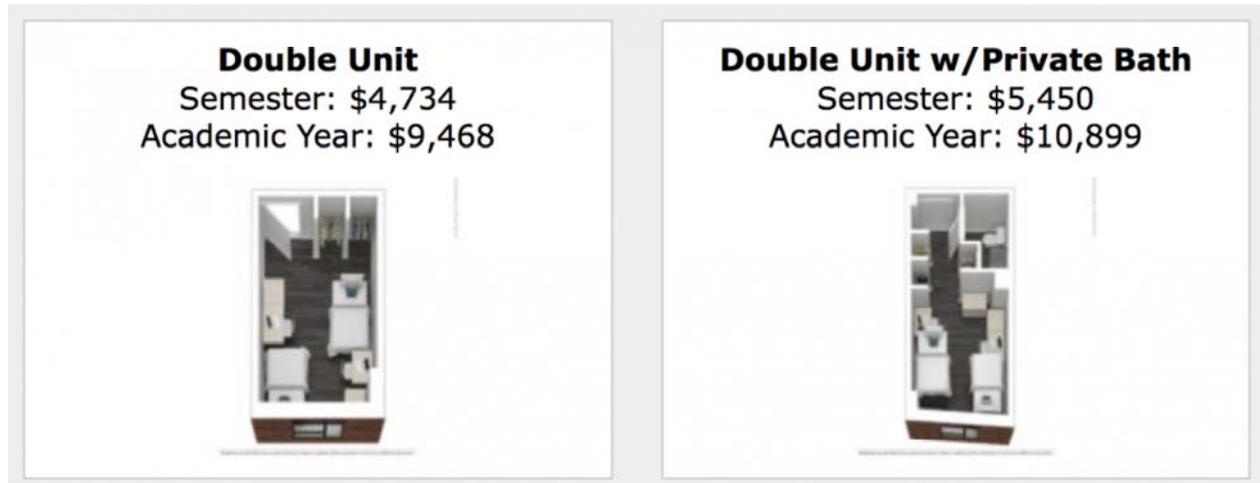
Johanne Legrand, left, executive chef for the building, was delighted as she and chancellor Newman oversaw the unpacking in her kitchen. “We have a pizza oven — it’s beautiful,” she said, pointing toward the flame-red and burnt-orange oven. “We have a grill area that’s really nice. We have a Mongolian station, so that’d be a stir fry station. They pick the vegetables and they take it out to the chef and they’ll wok it right up.” Jennifer Smith photo

Columbia Point neighbors have watched the towers rise with some trepidation about the impact that a new influx of residents could have on local housing. UMass Boston does not collect data on how many of its students live off campus in the private housing market, but Newman acknowledges that bringing in 1,000 students who will become used to living near campus means the university needs to prepare them to go out into the city afterward.

“I’ve given a lot of thought to that,” she said. “I’ve been talking to the student life group about developing a curriculum for house hunting, for finding roommates, for what is a lease, for how do you work with a landlord, what do you need in the way the deposit, how do you set up utilities, you know, all of the basic things that you need to learn when you’re living in an off-campus setting.”

The program would be available for all students, not just the dormitory residents, she said.

Sample floor plans are available at the UMass Boston housing [website \(http://umassbostonhousing.com/floor-plans/\)](http://umassbostonhousing.com/floor-plans/).



A campus building boom

Especially from the 12th floor common room, it is impossible to miss the sprawl of the ever-present construction across the campus. The utility corridor project and new roadway projects stand poised to better open up the campus on the Point.

Looking ahead at her tenure, Newman highlighted several forthcoming projects, chief among them the former Bayside Exposition Center site. Now, with the old buildings demolished, the 20-acre lot is primed for a massive overhaul as a new waterfront village.

“I’m very excited about what it’s going to mean for us, both in terms of opportunities to attract industry to the area and create jobs for the people in our neighborhood, as well as for students, opportunities for them, new housing, new retail,” she said.

A number of developers are bidding for the site right now, she added, saying she expects further news later in the fall. She has been in talks with the team surrounding the parcel about its potential, particularly as a windfall for the campus, but it may not include an academic tie-in from the start.

“There’s going to be a lively retail sector there, which will matter to everybody,” she said. “I’m sure that there will be public space. I’m not sure what it will look like, but some park-like public space will be there. I’m very eager to see that there are employment opportunities for people who live in Dorchester and Mattapan and all of the communities around us both in this construction, and in whatever is sited there in the end, the different kinds of enterprises ended up there. I’m sure there will be some, eventually, some form of our own footprint, but exactly what I don’t know because I’m interested in seeing what industries find it an attractive space and then thinking about what the academic and research complementarities might be.”

But Newman didn’t stop there. The Calf Pasture Pump Station, long neglected, is “an astounding piece of architecture that has just been left to go to complete wreck and ruin,” Newman said. “But it’s landmark for a reason and I think it should be saved and we should find a new way to use it.”

The showpiece nursing program could be on the slate for a permanent home, Newman said, looking out over massive piles of dirt in the midst of the school grounds.

“We really seriously need a nursing school, and we’re going to be **looking into the options for building one**,” she said.

UMass Boston has gone through ups and downs with enrollment in the midst of an ambitious and costly ongoing construction boom on the campus. “I mean, yes, there’s more construction to come,” she said, “but I think there will be a sense of stability here and a sense of elevation. I don’t mean that in a geographic sense, but a sense of the campus arriving in kind of a more important state.”

Student move-in day is Sunday, Sept. 2, to be concluded with a 10 p.m. trip to Target at South Bay, which is staying open exclusively UMB students. Classes start Tuesday, Sept. 4. Convocation is Thursday, Sept. 20.



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