

# The Boston Globe

## Saving this old house

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Tear-downs are the rage right now in Needham. And Susan and Edward Gagnon were loath to see the Victorian they had spent three decades lovingly fixing up meet the wrecking ball.

The couple had been painstaking in their renovations, even traveling to San Francisco to see its “painted ladies” and gather fresh inspiration.

So when local contractor Barbara Jones pledged to buy and renovate their home—rather than tear it down to make way for yet another McMansion—it was an offer they could not refuse.

“We have always cherished it — it’s a classic Princess Anne Victorian,” said Susan Gagnon, a retired Polaroid worker. “Barbara’s offer was kind of special. She said ‘I love your house,’ and she promised she wouldn’t knock it down.”

“Just to take down an old house because it is small and you can build a 4,000-square-foot home on the lot, it takes away that opportunity for a family just starting out,” Jones said. “I want to preserve the older homes and keep the charming feel of our 300-year-old town, while providing homes in the price range that is becoming increasingly rare — \$600,000 to \$800,000.”

As the founder of Little Pink Houses, Jones is on a mission to save Needham’s older homes from demolition while also providing a more affordable price point for young families than ultra-expensive new construction.

And she’s not alone, with another newly formed venture, Rotary Homes, having recently joined the hunt for old homes to save in Needham and across the region.

The contractors say they see a viable business niche in buying old homes with



Contractor Barbara Jones has big plans for a Victorian on Warren Street that she is restoring — instead of tearing down and replacing. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

character but in need of work, fixing them up, and selling them to families who can’t afford to spend a million dollars or more on new construction.

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Barbara Jones in the living room of the property she is renovating on Warren Street with an old icebox she found which will become the center island in the kitchen

The interest in saving and renovating Needham’s older homes comes as the number of tear-downs in town soars. There were 94 tear-downs in Needham last year, up from 61 in 2012 and 58 in 2009, according to Kate Fitzpatrick, Needham’s town manager.

Each tear-down has a double-barreled impact on the local housing market, Jones said. First, it takes off the market a house that might otherwise sell for roughly \$700,000, which would classify as a middle-class home in the area’s more-affluent communities, Jones said.

But after buying an older house for \$500,000 just to get at the lot, builders inevitably are going to put up new homes that are larger and more expensive in order to make a profit.

Homes built atop tear-down lots hit the market at a much higher price, say \$1.3 million and up, said Bill Paulson, a Needham real estate agent and cofounder of Rotary Homes.

And that, in turn, helps drive up prices across town.

“The price point goes up every time you knock down a home,” Paulson said. “There are so many tear-downs in this town it’s a shame.”

The median price of a house in Needham jumped 11 percent during the first ten months last year compared with the same period in 2012, hitting \$747,000, according to the Warren Group, which tracks the real estate industry.

As part of their hunt for older homes to protect from the wrecking ball, Paulson and his business partner in Rotary Homes, longtime Needham contractor Dan Tibma, came up with a marketing logo — Saving Area Homes for the Next Generation — and started sending out mailings to drum up business.

However, instead of simply focusing on Needham, the local Rotary Club members are looking for opportunities to rescue and renovate older homes in other area communities as well.

Rotary Homes is closing in on a deal in Westwood, Tibma said, and is looking as far afield as Brookline, where there are some potential mansion renovation opportunities.

“There is a niche where some people don’t want to buy a big new house — they would like an older one that has been fixed up,” Tibma said. “We can take a house with character and bring it up to today’s standards.”

A big fan of older homes, Jones got her basic training in renovation overseeing the restoration of the 1754 Colonial that she and her husband bought a few years ago.

She was out for a walk one weekend afternoon and saw an open house at a property for sale on Linden Street. Built in 1914, the home was in good shape but dated.

Jones had been thinking about trying to turn her newly acquired renovation skills to work as a business venture, and jumped at the opportunity.

She bought the Linden Street home in January 2012 for \$532,000, and spent \$100,000 fixing it up, drawing upon the various contractors who had helped renovate her own home. She sold it several months later for a modest profit.

Jones followed that up last year by purchasing a home on Warren Street — the Princess Anne Victorian that the Gagnons had lived in for years — for \$550,000. She hopes to get a price in the high \$700,000s for it.

“It is incredibly encouraging,” Gloria Greis, executive director of the Needham Historical Society, said of the efforts of Jones and other contractors to renovate rather than tear down the town’s older homes.

“No one says ‘that excellent McMansion on the corner, that is what really says Needham to me,’” she noted. “It really is the historic houses, the historic structures, that pin the town into New England and pin it into the historic context.”

For the Gagnons, selling the house to Jones meant it would be saved for a new family, an idea they liked.

It was also an easier process than putting the house on the open market, with Jones able to buy without the typical, monthslong process of finding a buyer who must line up a mortgage, inspections, and assessments.

“It made it very easy and tempting for us,” said Susan Gagnon, who is enjoying retirement with her husband at a house they bought in North Carolina.

Jones said her strategy is to preserve a home’s distinctive exterior features and interior flourishes while making it attractive to younger buyers, who tend to like open floor plans.

In the case of her Warren Street project, it has meant removing some walls and creating larger, more open spaces, since Victorian homes are often divided into many smaller rooms.

Jones is also putting in a dormer in the attic, turning what had been a half-renovated office and storage area into a master suite.

So far, her efforts appear to be gaining fans.

Krista Robinette and her husband, Brian, bought the first house Jones renovated, on Linden Street, after moving to the Boston area from a town outside St. Louis.

It was a natural fit — the couple share a love for old homes. Since moving in, Krista, an administrator at Northeastern University, has been approached by neighbors and passersby who were glad to see the house was still standing.

“There was a Victorian across the street that was torn down,” she said. “We have people walk by and say they are glad to see our house was saved — that is still here.”

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