

When the Somerville YMCA wanted to expand, these homeowners wouldn't sell. So the Y plans to build around them.

By [Spencer Buell](#) Globe Staff, Updated March 2, 2026, 32 minutes ago



A rendering of the YMCA's planned expansion, which was designed to fit around its neighbor's home. STANTEC AND THE SOMERVILLE YMCA

SOMERVILLE — Again and again they have asked. And every time, the answer has been the same:

No.

For several years, leadership at the Somerville YMCA has tried to strike a deal with its neighbor, an unassuming two-story home at the corner of Highland Avenue and School Street.

Their plan to replace the city's crumbling old facility with a gleaming new one four times its size, and with scores of new units of affordable housing, hinged in part on buying the family home and building on top of it.

But even as they have offered ever more money, the owners of the house with the curved stoop and the garden out front have made it clear they aren't going anywhere.

So now, as the Y begins finalizing a planned expansion, a decision has been made that may reverberate through the decades: Instead of buying the home, they will simply build around it.

"We really upped the ante in the last few years to work with them to reach a deal," said Vladimir Benoit, the Y's CEO. But, he said, "we couldn't wait anymore."

The troubles at the Y began well before the Topouzoglou family arrived on the block in the 1980s, settling in the property right across from Somerville High School.



The owners of a house at the corner of Highland Avenue and School Street have turned down offers from the Somerville YMCA to buy it. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

Immigrants from Greece, they raised four children in the home and lived comfortably in the neighborhood despite never being fully confident in their English. They gave their corner of the intersection curb appeal, planting dahlias, hibiscus, and peonies in a lush garden and surrounding it with decorative stone and a wrought-iron fence.

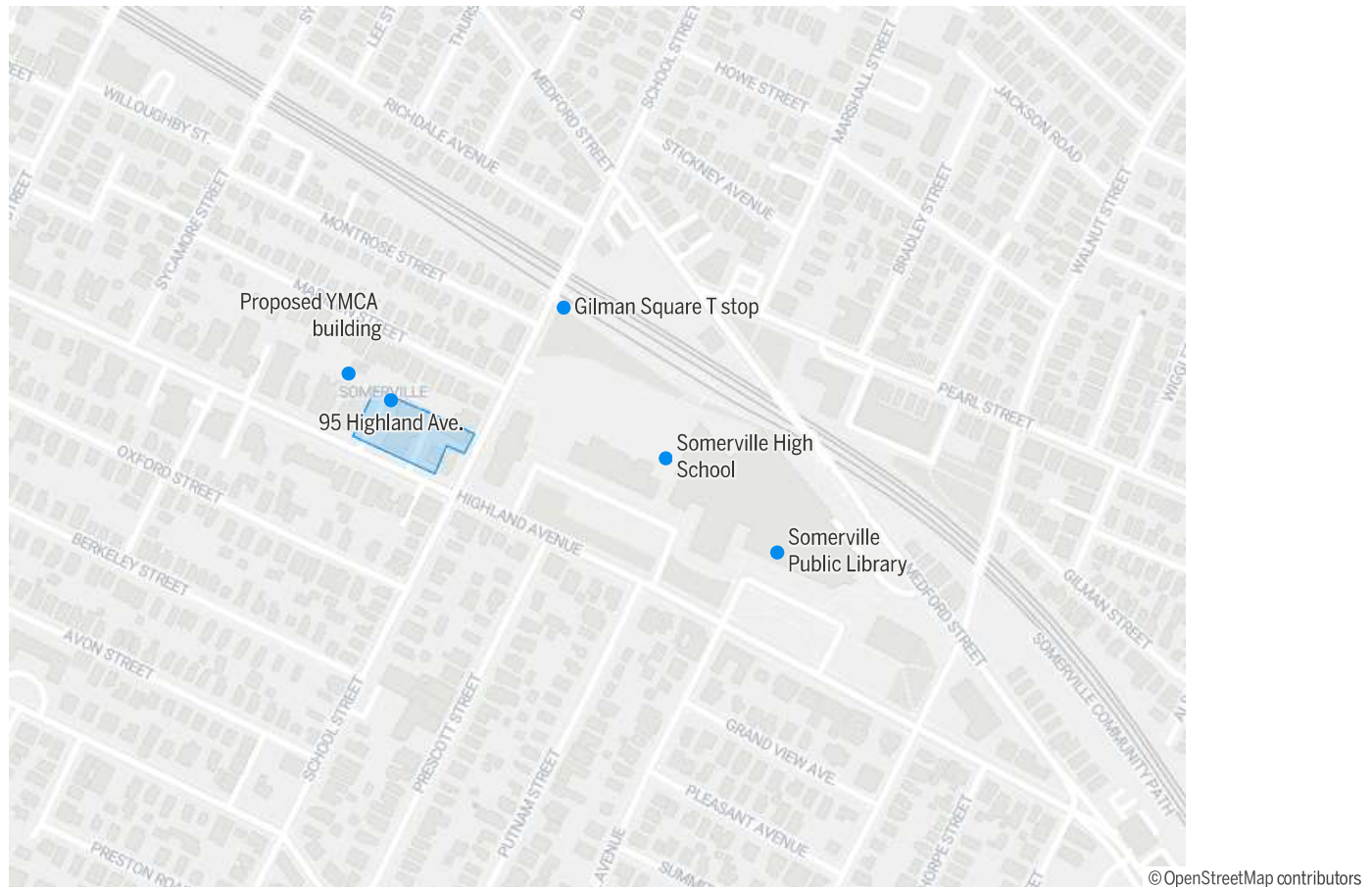
"At this stage in their lives, stability, sunlight, privacy, and peace are more important than ever to them," said Angela Terzides, their daughter. "Their preference remains to continue living in the home they have cared for

and cherished for more than four decades.”

Her parents, now in their 70s and 80s, declined an interview. But Terzides said they have not been persuaded by the Y's entreaties to buy them out, nor by its current offer of \$2.5 million, which is \$1 million more than the city's assessed value of the property.

They like the walkability, their neighbors, and the culture, she said. It's hard to put a price tag on that. Even a big one.

Proposed location of Somerville YMCA building



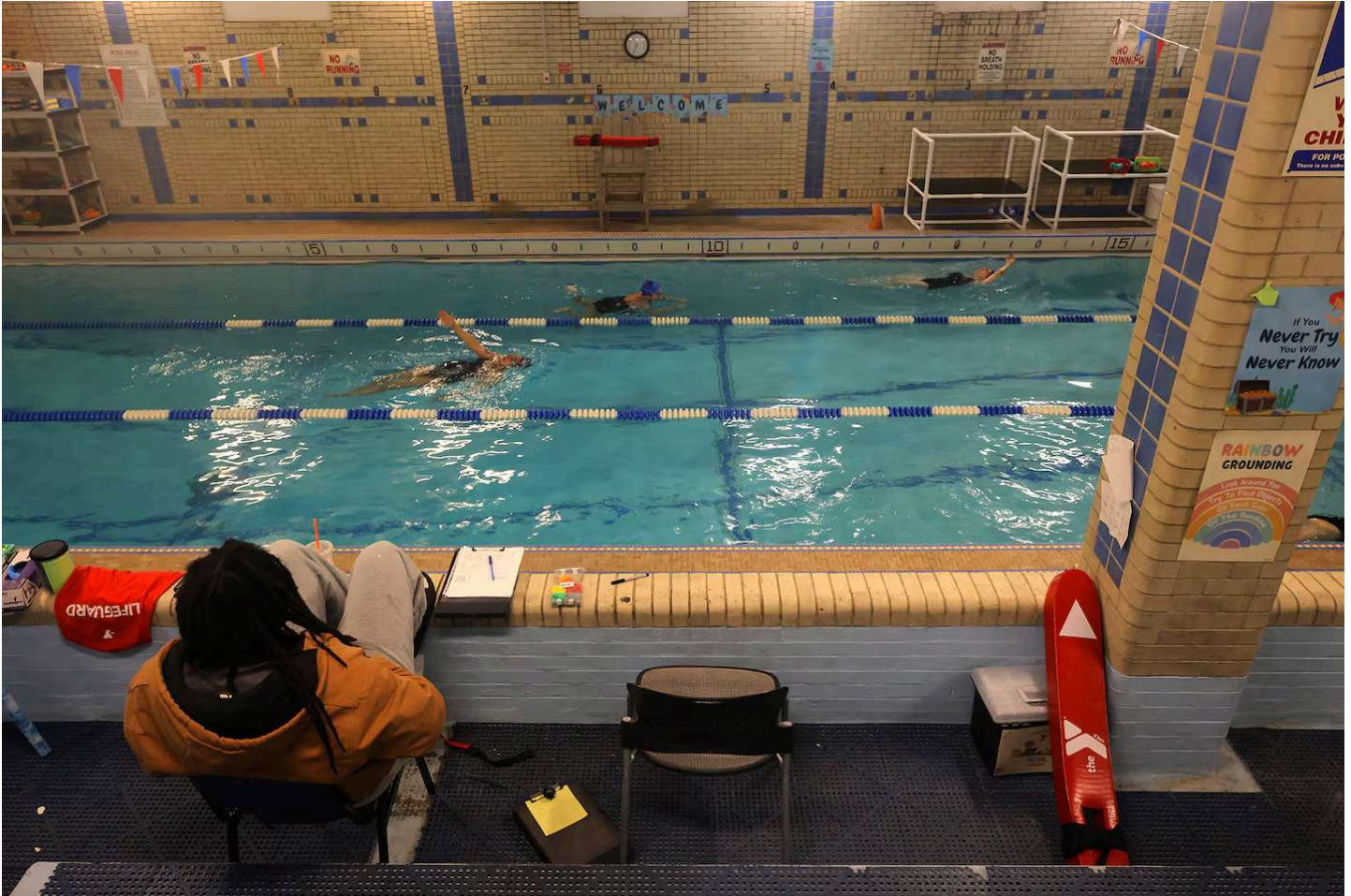
Map: JOHN HANCOCK/GLOBE STAFF

They were steadfast even as the Y made clear its plan was to build walls right up to the edge of their property line, in two directions, blocking the sunlight for much of the day. And even as the Y said it would take an estimated two-and-a-half years of heavy construction, just a few feet from their sunflowers.

Moving simply never felt as right as staying put, Terzides said. So the situation has put them in a bind.

“It's wonderful what the YMCA is trying to do for the community. But put yourself in my position. What would you do if this was happening to your own parents?”

The case for scrapping and rebuilding the old YMCA, the only one serving this city of 80,000, hardly needs to be made.



Leadership at the Somerville Y says its amenities, including its basement pool, are too small to serve this city of 80,000. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF



Residents in the Somerville YMCA's affordable housing units share communal bathrooms. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

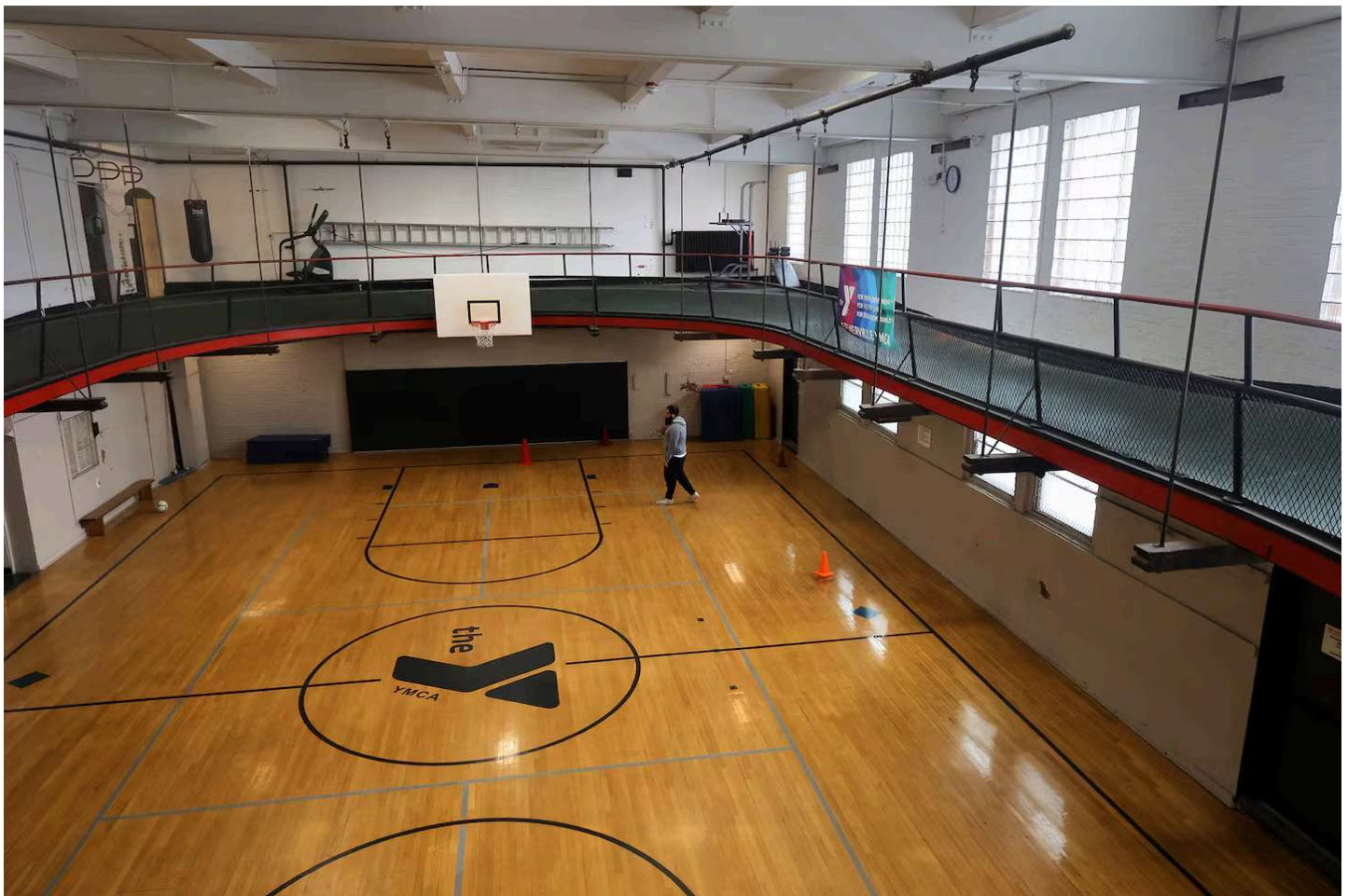
Gyms in the health club, built in 1904, are cramped. The basement swimming pool is so small and in such high demand that the YMCA swim team has to practice at an elementary school a mile away.

It has its charm. In one corner, a row of treadmills sits alongside an out-of-use fireplace, one of several in the building. In the cozy aquatics area is decorated with vintage painted tiles, the pool's water flows from the mouth of a cast-iron lion's head.

"It's like walking into a postcard where people are in old-timey bathing suits and deep-sea diving suit helmets," said Ben Ewen-Campen, a city councilor who represents this corner of Somerville and supports the Y redevelopment. "There are things everyone will miss about it when it's gone."

Above the always-busy basketball court is an ancient cantilevered running track with banked corners. According to a painted sign on one wall, it takes 29 laps to make a single mile.

There is a joke here that Somerville kids can't hit corner three-pointers, because jump shots from that spot tend to smack into the overhang.



The small gymnasium in the Somerville YMCA has an elevated and banked running track above the basketball court. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

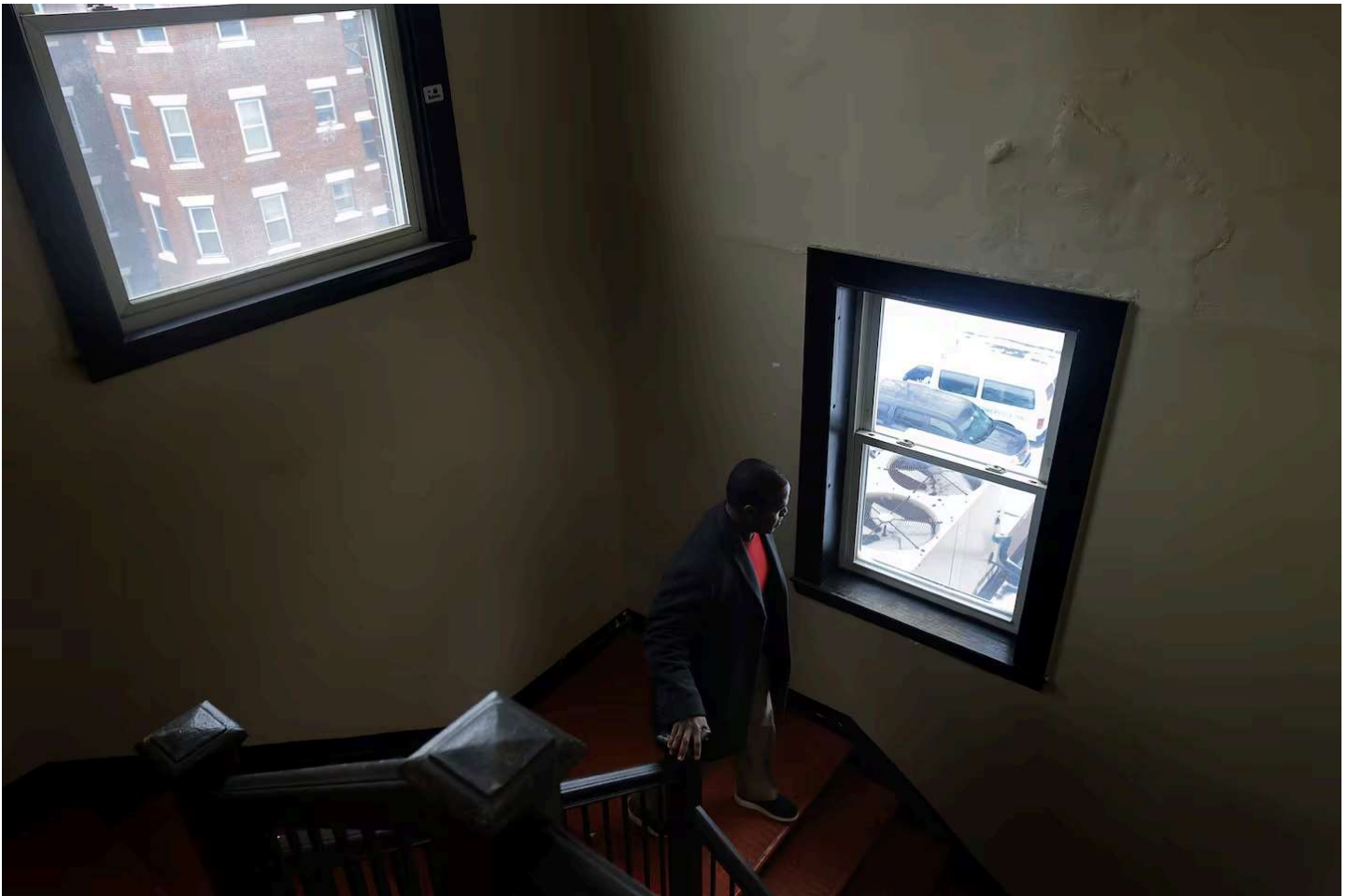
The facility is also home to 40 units of affordable housing, each a small studio. Residents, who pay around \$550 a month, share a bathroom and kitchenette. It's enough to put a roof over people's heads, but not, Benoit said, "a place anyone feels proud of."

Hidden in the walls, backrooms, and foundation are yet more problems. Old ones. Benoit said a structural engineer in 1967 said it was in such bad shape that the Y should stop doing major repairs and simply tear it down.

"Since then, all we've done is continue to put Band-Aids into the building," said Benoit.

All of this would change, he said, if the new Y is built. The plans call for leveling the old one, then expanding into a massive, fully accessible modern sports complex. It would stand six stories tall, and include enough space for a full-size pool, child-care center, gyms, and other amenities, alongside a sparkling new affordable housing complex.

There is still work to be done, including fund-raising and securing grant funding to cover the estimated \$175 million construction cost. Best case, Benoit said, construction wouldn't begin for another two years.



Vladimir Benoit, president and CEO of the Somerville YMCA, is leading efforts to complete a long-awaited expansion of the facility. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

So far, to prepare, the Y has bought a 9-unit apartment building, and another home next to it on Highland Avenue, which it uses as a day care.

Buying the Topouzoglou's home as well would allow the Y to build 80 to 120 units of affordable housing, Benoit said. Without it, that number is more like 60.

"In an ideal scenario, we'd love to be able to incorporate it as part of the project and be able to deliver more impact," Benoit said. "But at the same time, they have every right to continue to live there, and our job is to continue to be good neighbors regardless of what they ultimately decide to do."

He still hopes he can change the family's mind, he said, so the Y can stick to its original plan.

The effort has taken on many fronts. Once, in an effort to smooth things over, he delivered a box of Greek pastries.

"They told me they appreciated the treats," he said.

The answer was still no.

Spencer Buell can be reached at spencer.buell@globe.com. Follow him [@SpencerBuell](https://twitter.com/SpencerBuell).

[Show comments](#)

©2026 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC