

Biddeford welcomes affordable housing developer spurned by Cumberland voters

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Developers of a \$30 million affordable housing project rejected by Cumberland voters this spring soon could find a home for a similar proposal on city-owned property in Biddeford.

The proposal to build 107 affordable apartment units in Cumberland ignited a debate about the town's role in addressing the affordable housing crisis. Opponents raised concerns about the location, size and impact of the project, but people who supported it said some of their neighbors were trying to keep people who make less money out of town. Ultimately, two-thirds of the people who cast a ballot in March voted against the development.

After the vote, Biddeford Mayor Marty Grohman posted a message on social media saying the plan would have been approved in his city, where leaders have spent the past few years working on bringing more affordable housing to the community.

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Tylor Norod, development director for Westbrook Development Corporation, the nonprofit agency behind the project, said he jumped at the opportunity to talk to Biddeford officials about building a 76-unit project on city-owned land on Barra Road.

“They’re being really proactive and trying to find solutions, not just with affordable housing, but housing of all types,” Norod said. “They’re trying to be very thoughtful with how they’re growing their community while still having housing development at the forefront.”

Biddeford began looking at ways to bring more housing, including affordable apartments, to the city as purchase and rental prices were pushed higher in recent years. City leaders say those increases were driven by the ongoing housing crisis and renewed interest in Biddeford as the downtown area was redeveloped.

Several years ago, Biddeford formed an affordable housing task force that was charged with looking at the issue and ultimately recommended the city set a goal of creating and preserving affordable housing.

“This project would make good sense for Biddeford,” Grohman said. “We have a lot of need for this type of housing.”

The planning board is in the process of reviewing the plans and has a hearing scheduled for Wednesday night. The City Council will need to approve a contract zone for the project to move forward because it is located in a commercial industrial zone.

Norod said the project is similar, but not identical, to the one that voters rejected in Cumberland. The proposal became controversial in that community as people raised concerns about the location on town-owned property and the income levels of people who would live there.

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George Gervais, Biddeford’s director of economic and community development, said the Westbrook Development Corporation presented a plan that was ready to act on, allowing the city to move quickly to start the approval process. He said it is one of four affordable housing projects in the pipeline for Biddeford.

“One project a year wouldn’t be enough for us right now,” he said. “As many as we can get on the books, that’s what we’re doing.”

The proposed Biddeford development calls for two buildings – one with 36 one-bedroom units for people 55 and older and the other with 40 units without age restrictions. The second building would be a mix of one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments. All of the apartments

will be reserved for households making 50% or 60% of the area median income, a maximum of \$34,300 for an individual at 50% and \$41,160 for an individual at 60%.

According to MaineHousing, rents for people at those levels would range from \$1,098 to \$2,184, depending on household size.

The buildings will have a similar aesthetic to the ones proposed in Cumberland, with a New England style that features gabled roofs and farmhouse porches, Norod said. There will be a natural play area with seating between the buildings that helps foster multigenerational connections and a sense of community, he said.

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The buildings will be energy efficient, with electric heating and cooling systems, rooftop solar panels and conduits for future electric vehicle charging stations.

Grohman said the location on the 3.65-acre lot on Barra Road has it all: it's close to existing bus routes, the hospital, medical offices, the YMCA and shopping centers. It's also near the turnpike exit, making it ideal for people who commute to work.

Under a joint development agreement with the city, Westbrook Development Corporation will pay \$400,000 for pump station improvements on Barra Road. The city will establish a 30-year credit enhancement agreement with 75% reimbursement to the developer as long as the property is used for affordable housing.

Norod hopes to have all municipal approvals in place by the end of August, which would allow the developers to apply for MaineHousing annual funding when the process opens in September.

"There is a lot of competition for that funding," he said. "Sometimes it takes longer than one application, but we're confident this will score very well and should be very competitive."

If the project is approved by Biddeford and receives funding from MaineHousing on the first try, Norod expects construction would start next year.

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