

LOCAL

'Deeply affordable' housing proposal drives wedge between Methodist clergymen

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ASHEVILLE – Dustups between developers intent on bringing a project to a neighborhood and neighbors vigorously opposed to it are as common around here as brewpubs and taco trucks.

But the latest pair to square off over a development proposal — Brian Combs and Howard Hanger, both ordained Methodist ministers — comes as a surprise to some. That's especially true because this project revolves around "deeply affordable" housing, and Asheville has a notoriously severe affordable housing problem.

The wedge between these two men, as well as many other opponents and supporters, is a proposal for 45 apartments and a community center on the edge of a mostly residential area called the West End Clingman Avenue Neighborhood, or WECAN. Haywood Street Community Development, a subsidiary of the Haywood Street Congregation church, hopes to build the project at 339 West Haywood St.

That's a couple of blocks from the home where Hanger, 77, has lived for the past 49 years in a huge red brick mansion he shares with guests and renters. Hanger retired as pastor of Jubilee! church in downtown Asheville two years ago after a 30-year run.

Combs, founding pastor of the Haywood Street Congregation, a nonprofit that provides services, food and help to the most vulnerable, troubled people, says after a dozen attempts at finding a suitable location, this is the best fit.

In a Sept. 18 Facebook post, Hanger wrote that he's lived through "some very dangerous things" over the decades in the WECAN neighborhood, including theft and even a murder.

"Yet with all of this history, I feel that this 'deeply affordable' housing project is more dangerous and threatening to our neighborhood than anything else," Hanger wrote. "Haywood Street Community Church started out wonderfully, yet it has obviously gotten out of control and has turned into a health and safety hazard, with active needle drug use on and around the grounds. I have no faith or reason to believe that Haywood Community Development would be any different."

In phone interviews, Hanger said his main concern is the size and density of the proposal, but he also worries that it could bring in disruptive, troubled residents to the neighborhood.

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"I'm sympathetic, but I'm thinking about the numbers," Hanger said. "Our neighborhood is just cramped. To put in 45 units, which could be 90 people, it's outrageous. We'd be suffocating."

Combs, a quiet, thoughtful man and something of a counterweight to Hanger's gregarious, sometimes intentionally zany persona, says they have scouted, and dropped, 12 potential locations. He has been surprised by Hanger's vehement opposition.

"That's why I reached out to him first because I thought Howard would be an immediate champion of the project," Combs said. "I know that he's given safe shelter to many folks who would live in this potential building, in his mansion."

That's a reference to Hanger's spacious home, which has been de facto affordable housing for a lot of people over the years. Hanger has welcomed low-income musicians, artists, restaurant workers and others as residents of his home, with reasonable rents and full access to the house and grounds.

Combs knows Hanger opposes the project, but he points out a lot of other people, including many WECAN residents, support it.

Hanger's former church, Jubilee! issued a statement Oct. 13 in support of the proposal.

"Since its founding by Howard Hanger in 1989, Jubilee! Community has donated over \$2.2 million to organizations that feed the hungry and support the homeless in the greater Asheville area, including the Haywood Street Congregation, Homeward Bound, Pisgah Legal Services, Mountain Housing Opportunities, Habitat for Humanity and others this year alone," the statement reads. "Jubilee! expects to continue to support the Haywood Street Congregation as it moves forward with its deeply affordable housing program and its many other activities that address the needs of unhoused and low-income individuals."

More: Affordable housing development's approval had 'zero transparency,' bristles neighbors

Laura Collins, Jubilee!'s minister of transition, said in the statement, "Many of our current leadership believe this development — which is designed with dignity and the desire to create a sense of belonging — is vital to addressing the needs of very low-income individuals in Asheville."

Bruce Mulkey, a longtime Jubilee! member who sits on its board, stressed that the church continues to have great respect for Hanger.

"Howard Hanger, our founder and long-time minister, is deeply revered by Jubilee's leadership and its members," Mulkey said via email. "However, I don't believe his opposition to the Haywood Street Congregation project reflects the prevailing attitude of our community; I know it doesn't reflect mine. I find myself perplexed by Howard's resolute stance on this."

What the proposal is, and isn't

While the project has not formally been submitted to the city yet, Combs said a lot of confusion and misinformation has made the rounds. Haywood Street Community Development, the developing entity, hopes to submit a formal application to the city in the coming weeks, he said.

"It's been kind of strange, but I've found myself beginning most neighborhood engagement meetings with what our proposal is not," Combs said. "It's not Haywood Street Congregation, which is a low-barrier church."

Haywood Street Community Development is technically a subsidiary of Haywood Street Congregation, but it's a legally separate nonprofit from the church, with its own by-laws and board. However, "the congregation populates a percentage of the HSCD board and serves as a primary influence," Combs said.

Combs serves as HSCD's interim project manager and holds a non-voting position on its board.

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The idea behind a separate entity was two-fold, Combs said: "To create a legal and fiduciary firewall between the congregation and community development," and "to dispel any concern that evangelism, of any kind, was part of our proposal for deeply affordable housing."

Haywood Street Community Development is under contract to buy two lower lots at the 339 W. Haywood Street site that total 0.87 acres. If permitting and construction moves forward, the project will comprise 45 units, with all of them

reserved for residents who make 30%-80% of the area median income, or AMI, or between \$15,000 and \$42,000 annually.

It would remain an affordable housing project in perpetuity, by deed. The units will break down this way:

At the 30% AMI level (someone earning up to \$15,000 annually) — 13 one-bedroom units, nine two-bedrooms and one three-bedroom, for 23 total units.

At the 60% AMI level (someone earning up to \$30,000 annually) — Five one-bedrooms units, three two-bedrooms, one three bedroom, for nine total units.

At the 80% AMI level (someone earning up to \$42,000 annually) — Six one-bedroom units, six two-bedrooms, one three-bedroom unit, for 13 total units.

Combs said the units will have nicer touches, such as masonry foundations, 9-foot ceilings, balconies, enclosed hallways and Hardy Plank siding.

“These are nice units – they’re not decadent, but they’re nice,” Combs said. “We want them to be forever homes for people.”

Total expense is estimated at \$8-\$10 million, although Combs noted construction costs can vary from year to year. Haywood Street Community Development lists as "potential funders," the city of Asheville, at \$2.5 million, Buncombe County at \$2 million and Dogwood Health Trust at \$2 million.

At a community gathering at the site Oct. 10, Combs said he brought up a long-range possibility of a second phase of the project that could result in a total of 70 units. Combs said later he described that as "only a distant possibility," saying the owners of an adjacent 0.37 acre parcel approached Haywood Street Community Development about buying the lot for \$700,000.

That would be "too expensive to justify adding additional units," Combs said.

"If the price ever comes down, we could consider a phase two option that would increase our units from 45 to around 70," Combs said. "However, this scenario is only a distant possibility. I wanted the neighborhood to know the sellers had approached us, even though nothing came of the discussion."

Community Center to be part of development

Haywood Street Community Development also hopes to build a 3,000-square-foot community space with the apartments, but Combs stresses it will not be a day shelter.

“The community space is intended for the residents who live there and immediate neighbors that want to deepen relationships with folks that live in the building,” Combs said. "What it's not is a direct service provider where foot traffic from all over, every day of the week would be coming in, like AHOPE (a daytime facility downtown for homeless people).”

Ironically, a lot of formerly homeless people who get permanent housing fall into depression, because it's strangely isolating, Combs said. So the community center could help fight that.

Hanger worries about the apartments and community center devolving into a place where troubled people hang out, because Haywood Street Congregation caters to people who, as he says, "are living on the edge."

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"Compassion towards the unhoused is important ... but it cannot come at the cost of health and safety to the ones that have worked very hard for their homes," Hanger wrote in his Facebook post.

The Haywood Street Congregation, located across I-240 and Patton Avenue from the site, is a couple of blocks from 339 West Haywood. Combs makes no bones that the church takes in everyone in need, providing food, shelter and services.

"We have said for 11 years, 'If you're intoxicated, psychotic, if you're just out of incarceration, if you're having your worst day, we want you to come and be with us,' Combs said. "'And if you fall apart and it's messy, we will hold safe space for that.'"

The housing proposal, however, will not be for people in that kind of dire shape, who need 24-hour "wrap-around services" and care that includes psychiatric and medical support, Combs said. The residents they hope to house at 339 West Haywood are people who are "doing well," Combs said.

"They're just looking for a next step up and want a little bit safer housing," Combs said. "They don't want to be around as much violence, (they're) looking for different neighbors. Maybe they're people who are working 40-hour jobs that just literally can't afford to live in Asheville, and (they) likely have no struggles with addiction or mental illness."

The proposal also is not the city of Asheville's Ramada Inn low-barrier shelter in East Asheville, or Homeward Bound's AHOPE day shelter downtown, or that organization's proposal to transform a former Days Inn on Tunnel Road into permanent housing for 85 homeless people, Combs added.

Zoning allows higher density

The West Haywood Street property is zoned Community Business I, a designation dating to June 2018, according to Shannon Tuch, principal planner with the city of Asheville.

"At the time, the property owner requested the change to allow more flexibility for developing a mix of housing and commercial uses," Tuch said.

Buncombe County property records list the owner Brown Haven Heights LLC, which has an office on Merrimon Avenue and its principal office in Hiawassee, Georgia.

The former zoning was Neighborhood Business, which allowed up to 12 units an acre.

"The current Community Business I zoning allows up to 20 units an acre, which can be increased to 40 units per acre, with a minimum of 20% of the units being affordable," Tuch said.

Most of the WECAN neighborhood is zoned RM-8, or residential multifamily, medium density.

Sometimes called "Chicken Hill," a reference to a former nearby chicken hatchery farther down the slope toward the French Broad River, the WECAN neighborhood is bounded by Interstate 240 and Patton Avenue on the north, Clingman Avenue to the east, Lyman Street on the south and the river to the west. Some of the area closest to the French Broad is considered more in the River Arts District, depending on who's drawing the lines.

Fascinating history of WECAN

Historically, WECAN was home to mill workers and other blue-collar residents in the early-to-mid 20th century.

Hanger's home has a rich history itself, built in the late 1800s by a Russian-born immigrant, Peter A. Demens, who owned a sawmill on the French Broad River. Demens stayed just two years, then sold to Col. and Mrs. James H. Rumbough, owners of the Mountain Park Hotel in Hot Springs, according to the chickenhill.com website.

In 1913, the Rumboughs sold to Ida Jolly Crawley, "a Tennessee artist and world traveler who opened the house as a museum," maintaining ownership until 1946. Hanger bought the mansion in 1973 and began renting out its eight rooms, later opening Hanger Hall School for Girls there (it has since moved), the website states.

The WECAN neighborhood features a mix of old and new homes. When the Bowen Bridge and I-240 bored through Asheville in the middle of the 20th century, they cleaved off a section of the neighborhood to the north.

Combs said one of the reasons he believes the West Haywood Street site is ideal is because the neighborhood has a legacy of and commitment to affordable housing.

Tuch said the city also has a strong commitment to affordable housing, and WECAN's location just west of downtown makes it a strong contender for more.

"All housing is valuable, but supporting affordable housing that is in close proximity to employment centers, transit, goods and other services is one of our highest priorities," Tuch said. "This property is strategically located to offer access to these quality of life amenities."

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While the city does not have a formal application yet, Tuch said, "we are anticipating that this project will require a conditional zoning because the building footprint and total square footage would exceed what is allowed" in that area.

Combs said they've been in conversation with the city and expect to have to pursue conditional zoning. They've chosen a path that will require several votes, including City Council approvals for the conditional zoning and possible funding for land acquisition and construction.

Haywood Street Community Development feels strongly about spacing the votes out because they want to maximize transparency and residents' input, Combs said.

Residents 'across the spectrum'" on the proposal

Rebecca Lance, chairperson of the WECAN Association, has lived in the neighborhood since 2008. While WECAN formed in the 1980s in part to address development, the neighborhood is diverse and colorful, and, "We generally do not end up achieving consensus in this neighborhood," Lance said with a laugh.

The same holds true for this latest proposal.

"We have people who are across the spectrum on this," Lance said. "Some are very strongly supporting it with a firm 'yes,' while some people are a very firm 'no,' with some all the way to very vehemently opposing it and they are organizing around that."

Lance's take is that the WECAN neighborhood is "just concerned about all the development happening in this area," which brings with it traffic impacts and infrastructure needs. Some do feel it's moving ahead too fast, Lance added.

"I personally am interested in finding out how the property is going to be managed — how they're going to make decisions about who comes to live in the property," Lance said. "So we're working as a neighborhood to gather as much info about that as possible."

While the specter of NIMBYism — "Not In My Backyard" opposition — is always present with any development, Lance doesn't believe that's the root cause of opposition here.

"WECAN has always had as part of our core that we support public housing, and we want public housing in this neighborhood," Lance said, citing multiple existing lower-income housing projects already in the area. "There's always

been a strong current of support for that. I think lot of people in the neighborhood either don't know that history or don't agree with it."

Density is also a concern, and a lot of residents are "newly waking up to realities" of how the neighborhood and the site in question are zoned, as well as WECAN's proximity to downtown zoning and the allowed uses that come with that. The city has been pursuing increasing density from the city center out for a while now, Lance notes.

"Some people are struggling with that," Lance said. "And that's OK. It's just going to take some time."

Not opposed to affordable housing, but opposed to this location

Leah Graham Stewart is one of those struggling with the proposal. She and her husband have two children, ages 5 and 8, and she says "WECAN is a great place to live." They built a new home in the neighborhood four and a half years ago.

"We would love more people to live there — just not in the way it's being presented," said Stewart, who does marketing for a real estate firm and holds a master's degree in urban planning and has worked in that field. "There's no doubt there is a need for affordable housing — there's no argument there."

She also understands WECAN's history of affordable workforce housing, and the toll the interstate took on the neighborhood, which she says is "disconnected" and somewhat isolated from the downtown and the River Arts District. At the top of her list of concerns is that the proposal brings too much density, and it doesn't mesh with the existing neighborhood.

Affordable homes are "peppered" throughout WECAN, including those built through organizations that help low-income people afford housing. But they fit in well, Stewart says.

This proposal won't, she said. Still, Stewart rejects the notion that the reservations about the project represent NIMBYism.

"Any neighborhood would have an issue with something like this going in," Stewart said, adding that she knows Combs personally and respects the work he does. "But his walk to the park is really different than my walk to the park. He lives in a different neighborhood than me."

Stewart mentioned minor crime the WECAN neighborhood already deals with, and she worries the Haywood Street Congregation's proximity to the housing site may result in "a ripple effect."

"I don't think the affordable housing folks are going to be that way," Stewart said. "But we're already dealing with a lot in our neighborhood."

'Where couldn't they go?'

In some ways, the proposal amounts to an experiment, and that's not a comfortable prospect, Stewart said.

"Every single neighborhood that surrounds downtown is a transitional zone," Stewart said, adding that this is a big question for the city: "How do you preserve the neighborhoods and keep the downtown viable?"

Stewart said she's told Combs she would use her expertise to help HSCD find a more suitable site.

"There's got to be something that makes more sense, something that won't fracture a neighborhood," Stewart said. "There's got to be a solution, and I think it's density and the form being presented."

Asked where such a project should go, Hanger said, "Where couldn't they go?" He mentioned several large vacant retail sites, including a former Kmart in West Asheville and empty spots at Asheville Mall. Homeless advocates have cited

More: Answer Man: Could the old Kmart building serve as a homeless shelter?

Combs said they have already pursued "about a dozen locations," most recently withdrawing a proposal in July for land along Asheland Avenue near downtown because it had a troubled history with urban renewal. Between the "Not In My Backyard" phenomenon, politics and money, it's tough to do affordable housing anywhere, he says.

"This particular proposal is the furthest we've gotten, and we feel encouraged for a number of reasons," Combs said.

The site is not urban renewal land, does not have immediate residential neighbors and the neighborhood endorses affordable housing, Combs explained.

While Combs touts the neighborhood support he's seen and heard, he knows some who oppose the project are fearful, and he says he can appreciate that.

"My sense is, for most of the folks in opposition, it's less a stereotype – although I'm sure that's a factor – and more just straight-up fear, and I can appreciate that," Combs said.

Hanger, who has largely recovered from a stroke two years ago, has raised questions about the type of people who will live in the apartments.

"He's worried about his safety," Combs said. "Some other folks who have been opposed are parents with young children. Others are people who don't have an uncle with schizophrenia or an aunt that's in recovery, and simply haven't been able to experience the humanity of folks that in their worst moments can come across as scary."

When people volunteer or visit Haywood Street Congregation, they often come away with a different impression.

"I'm astounded in the way in which once people break bread with someone else that they assume is so radically different, on the other side of that meal or praying with someone or simply just hearing a story, the stereotypes, the knee-jerks, the places of embedded suspicion, they tend to fall away rather quickly," Combs said.

Despite Hanger's high-profile opposition, Combs remains optimistic that this is the site they'll finally be able to build on.

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"When you move through Asheville, there's such a progressive flag that we wave," Combs said. "Because of that, I have to assume there's a willingness."

He also mentioned the recent influx of the pandemic-related American Rescue Act money, and a general sense that people may have more empathy for others' suffering during the pandemic.

"If we were going to get a project across the finish line, this feels like the moment," Combs said.

Want to learn more?

Haywood Street Community Development has more about the 339 W. Haywood St. proposal on its website: <http://haywoodstreet.org/housing/>

Also, the Rev. Brian Combs will host on-site informational meetings about the project at 1 p.m. on Nov. 7, Dec. 5, and Jan. 9. Meetings will be at the site, 339 W. Haywood St.