

NEWS

Asheville commits funds to 'deeply affordable' housing over divided neighborhood

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ASHEVILLE — The City Council has voted to become an early stage funder of a "deeply affordable" apartment complex, even though the money could be lost if the project does not advance.

The council took the vote Oct. 26 in the face of a stark housing need for Asheville's poorest residents and a neighborhood that's split over the proposal.

The 6-1 vote will pay for \$296,000 in due diligence costs for the proposed Haywood Street Community development in the West End Clingman Avenue Neighborhood near downtown. The money comes from \$25 million in bond borrowing approved by voters in 2016.

If the 45-unit project moves ahead, the Haywood Street Congregation Church and others behind it will look to the city for another \$2.2 million. That will go toward an estimated \$8.3 million total cost, those involved with the development said.

Vice Mayor Sheneika Smith said she supported the funding, despite the possibility the money could be lost. That was because of the desperation of those such as a very ill former client and current friend who was homeless. The friend had to rely on Haywood Street Congregation's respite program but now had a home, said Smith, a former community development coordinator for the nonprofit Green Opportunities.

"Today she had heart surgery. It's been surgery after surgery after surgery. And because she's homeless, I would have to pick her up and drop her off at your respite. I was so very glad that this time around I didn't have to drop her off at your respite. I dropped her off at her new apartment."

Councilmember Gwen Wisler, the lone holdout, agreed the need was great. But Wisler said it was not prudent to commit money at the early stage when it was not clear the development could go forward. The two other potential major contributors are Buncombe County government and the Dogwood Health Trust, which dispenses money from the sale of the formerly nonprofit Mission Hospital. The two have signaled their interest but have not committed.

"My question is, is it premature for the city to be committing to these kinds of funds with with such a large gap in the funding" Wisler said?

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Of the 45 apartments, 23 will go to the poorest residents. The units remaining will go to those who are better off and even work but are making less than the area median income. Developers gave examples of residents as single mothers, home care aides and teachers.

The project has split WECAN, the neighborhood that sits between the River Arts District and downtown. Among opponents is well-known resident Howard Hanger, who like Haywood Street leader Brian Combs, is an ordained Methodist minister.

Hanger did not speak at the Oct. 26 virtual meeting, but resident and former pro-cyclist Jamie Bookwalter did, saying the project — which would need a zoning variance because of its size — was too big for the neighborhood whose homes are

packed onto steep, winding streets.

"Cars are regularly smashed into on these roads," she said.

Bookwalter said some residents feared drug use and other issues associated with the property around Haywood Street's main campus downtown.

"Many of the crime problems, you know, do stem from the the owner of the proposed development."

Resident Hildy Teegen, though, said she moved recently from Charleston, South Carolina, to WECAN "specifically because I'm interested in making a future life in a community that is committed to affordability and housing."

"I'm profoundly proud to be a part of the WECAN community. And I'm very, very excited to lend my support for this particular project," Teegen said.

Combs defended Haywood Street's programs, saying it accepts many who are rejected by society and isolated.

"We prefer relationships over rules. We welcome people without condition, many on their worst days."

The eight-bed respite program is different, he said. It serves the chronically homeless, including those in need of hospice.

"In respite, the rules of ministry are very different than what happens in the parking lot. For example, they don't have visitors. There's no drug or alcohol use. We take folks to their appointments. There's follow up care. It's a closed facility."

He said they would contract with a property manager with experience, such as Givens Estates United Methodist, which manages 1,500 residents.

Combs said Haywood Street already pursued a dozen locations for the project. They most recently withdrew from city-owned property on Asheland Avenue south of downtown after revelations about its troubled history with urban renewal and neighborhood pushback.

Combes said the other donors were watching to see what the city does.

Smith said it was important for Asheville to lead.

"This is such a great need," the vice mayor said. "And I know it's hard. I know it's a big risk. And I know we don't want to be the first people to put ourselves out there, but this is something I feel very compelled deeply to do."

Details

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.

Joel Burgess has lived in WNC for more than 20 years, covering politics, government and other news. He's written award-winning stories on topics ranging from gerrymandering to police use of force. Please help support this type of journalism with a subscription to the Citizen Times.