

## NEWS

# One giant step for affordable housing: Haywood Street apartment passes P&Z Commission

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Apartments dedicated to deep affordability are moving forward near downtown Asheville, where developers plan to tie every unit to affordable rent levels.

The Asheville Planning and Zoning Commission on Jan. 5 unanimously approved of a needed rezoning for the four-story building, set for two lots totaling 0.86-acres at 339 West Haywood St., and abutting the interstate exit leading to Patton Avenue.

Developers with Haywood Street Community Development, a sister nonprofit of Haywood Street Congregation, need a conditional zoning and must still get approval from Asheville City Council before seeking building permits and breaking ground.

Planner Shannon Tuch presented the project at the commission's Jan. 5 meeting, saying developers are seeking three variations from normal limits, including exceeding the normal 50 units per acre allowed in the Community Business I district for projects including affordable housing, with 52.3 units per acre planned.

It's set for the Jan. 25 City Council meeting, she said.

The project also wants to exceed the total square footage limit of 45,000 square feet with a total 49,000 square feet, and exceed the normal height requirement of 40 feet for a height of 41 feet 9 inches, measured as she explained, from the ground floor of the main entrance level to the top of the tallest inhabited floor.

“Compared to other reviews, these are relatively modest increases,” Tuch said.

Parking is in the back and under the building with a total 55 spaces, 35 of which will be housed in a parking structure underneath the building.

A picnic table area is planned behind the building near the interstate, and the first floor includes multipurpose rooms for residents to use, Tuch said, not for other programming or community use.

Brian Combs, founding pastor of Haywood Street Congregation and project manager for Haywood Street Community Development, which is the congregation's sister nonprofit working for affordable housing, said 12 years of service to the homeless community have informed the project proposed for West Haywood Street.

He shared the story of who he sees as a typical resident of the development, the teacher of his daughter's preschool class, who could've sought a doctoral degree after graduating from UNCA but dedicated her life to serving kids.

“Nikki is the person I think about when I think about the face of this development,” Combs said. “She's a 30% AMI resident, and that's who we want to prioritize.”

He said she worked three part-time jobs: teaching, at the mall and babysitting, but could still only afford a “derelict, run-down motel on Merrimon Avenue” where he said she paid more than \$1,000 per month in rent.

“Basically it’s a 15-by-15 room with a bed in the middle, no kitchen and a lot of black mold,” Combs said. “Last fall she sold her car to try to make ends meet and ultimately decided that she had to move to Louisville where housing costs are quite a bit lower.”

“So on behalf of folks like Nikki, and people who clear our tables and change our bedsheets and take care of our children, I’m grateful for this chance to present and for you all to consider our conditional zoning request,” he said.

Ahead of the vote, Commissioner Jenifer Bubenik noted that affordable housing is one of the reasons she sought to serve on the Planning and Zoning Commission, but that no matter where it is, people don't want it in their backyard because it carries a stigma.

"There is a difference between affordable housing and a homeless shelter," she said. "Affordable housing is out there for young professionals who are making that \$25,000 a year and need that \$500 rent to help get them up to that \$40,000 a year so they can move out and they can start to own a place."

Commission Chair Joe Archibald said three years ago, he would have qualified to live in this project, and that developments providing this level of affordability in perpetuity just don't happen.

It's the first one he's seen in four years on the commission and two years of watching meetings before that, he said.

"And as far as I'm concerned, that pretty much takes everything," he said. "That mitigates a lot of other potential concerns that I would have."

Archibald extended his gratitude to Combs and the development team for bringing the project forward.

"We need as many projects like this as we can get throughout the city, throughout the county," he said.

## **'100% affordability in perpetuity'**

All 45 units in the development will be deeded affordable in perpetuity, with 13 of the 45 pinned to 60%-80% of the area median income and nine to 30%-60% AMI.

More than half the units would be restricted to only 30% AMI, Combs said, noting the urgency for affordable housing among residents earning up to \$15,000.

Of the 45, 51%, or 23 units, will be reserved for renters with Housing Choice Vouchers.

“What we are envisioning is a deeply affordable housing development with 100% affordability in perpetuity,” Combs said. “We’ve asked the city to deed-restrict the land so that there’s no scenario where these units could be flipped to market rate after 10, 20, 30 years or ever.”

The rent and income limits will be set by Asheville, which pulls data from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in setting rent rates based on AMI.

According to the city's matrix, 100% AMI for a single-person household is \$52,625. For a two-person household it's \$60,125, and 80% AMI is \$42,100 for a one-person household and \$48,100 for a two-person household.

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Sixty percent AMI is \$31,575 and \$36,075 for a one- and two person households, according to city data, and 30% AMI for one- and two-person households is \$15,800 and \$18,050 respectively.

For a one-bedroom apartment deeded to 80% AMI, the maximum rent with utilities included is set at \$1,128, and for 60% AMI at \$846. Maximum two-bedroom apartment rents with utilities included are \$1,353 at 80% AMI and \$1,014 at

At 30% AMI, the maximum rents for a one-bedroom apartment with utilities aren't listed on the city's matrix.

Combs said rents would include utilities as well as internet.

The proposal includes 18 two-bedroom and three three-bedroom units, Combs said, noting recent census data showing nearly 4,000 single mothers in Asheville.

He said the project would include an anti-eviction protocol and will partner with Pisgah Legal Services to make every intent to keep people inside.

"We would defy the minimum standards often used in affordable housing," Combs said. "We intend these to be dignified homes, not decadent or opulent but rather market-rate nice. Think 9-foot ceilings, stainless steel appliances, stone countertops, a balcony to watch the sunset to the west; places where people want to stay indefinitely."

## **'It's a monstrosity'**

Asheville attorney Sam Craig, spoke for a group of residents who ceded their time known as WECAN too, comprising more than 30 residential property owners and residents in the neighborhood bordered by the French Broad River, I-240 and Clingman Avenue.

"I contend that this is about zoning, whether this proposed change ... complies with the zoning ordinances," Craig said. "It's not about affordable housing."

He said his clients don't have anything against affordable housing but "live in a neighborhood that's going to be dramatically affected by this proposed change."

The Community Business II zoning district, Craig said, is designed per city code, "to be located primarily along minor and major thoroughfare streets which serve multiple residential neighborhoods."

There is no condition that would allow streets of WECAN to be considered even a minor thoroughfare street, he said that the city can't zone the streets into being thoroughfares, and zoning around that would defeat the purpose of the ordinances.

Not having a traffic study is also a concern Craig said, noting existing congestion in the area he said this project would exacerbate as well as pedestrian traffic to congested intersections.

City Traffic Engineer Chris Cairns said West Haywood Street is a low-volume road, but a traffic study wasn't required as the development didn't meet the threshold of an added 100 per-hour trips.

This one was in the low 20s per hour, he said, and the latest traffic count near this site was 1,100 cars per 24 hours, or a total of about 85 vehicles in both directions during peak-hour traffic.

Compared to the Community Business I district, which the lot is zoned now, the 49,000 square foot building proposed to be allowed by the conditional CBII zoning would constitute a 408% increase in size, he said.

Ultimately he said the project would negatively impact the residential WECAN neighborhood without meeting the goal of protecting and preserving its heritage.

"It's a monstrosity," Craig said. "It is huge, and it is not compatible with the neighborhood."

Bubenic shared concerns over traffic as well, and Archibald over the density, before both ultimately voted in favor of the rezoning.

Other callers, while showing support for goals of affordable housing, raised concerns of traffic flow and safety on the

Another caller said neighbors aren't against affordable housing, but the proposed location isn't right for the density the project would bring.

Not all were opposed, though. One caller said she and at least 24 other households in the neighborhood were in favor of the project, saying she would rather see affordable units than million-dollar homes.

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It's the second location where Haywood Street Congregation has tried to construct an affordable housing project, following pushback from neighbors of the first planned location: city-owned land along Asheland Avenue.

There, the group found a "moral dilemma," where Combs said Haywood Street would no longer pursue the development on the lot, acquired through the city's urban renewal projects that displaced Black communities.

The location in WECAN hasn't been without pushback either, as Rev. Howard Hanger, also a Methodist minister and WECAN resident for nearly 50 years, expressed concerns about the project he called "dangerous and threatening to our neighborhood."

Combs said Jan. 5 that Haywood Street Congregation would not use the apartment building as an auxiliary of its outreach efforts, and hold no programming at the site nor evangelism or worship services, but said it is an extension of how the church feels called to be in the world, via affordable housing.

"This is not a proposal that we intend to build and walk away from," he said. "We intend to be a part of this development as long as it exists."

Asheville City Council voted in October to pay nearly \$296,000 in due diligence costs for the project, pulling the funds from \$25 million in bond borrowing voters approved in 2016.

Noting 158 contacts with the neighborhood, Combs said developers have tried to be exhaustive with community engagement with four on-site meetings with the neighborhood beyond the required city meeting and adding design elements to honor the mill cottage heritage of WECAN.

The two primary concerns that have been raised are traffic and density, he said, noting that several other apartment projects are in the works nearby.

The commission's vote Jan. 5 sends a positive recommendation to City Council on the rezoning.

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