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Plans for former Riverbend, Bigelow schools approved by planning board.



- From the common playground area located on Park Avenue, the former Riverbend School is visible on the left (rear), and the former Ellen Bigelow School is on the right. Staff file photo

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ATHOL — The Board of Planning and Community Development has given its blessing to a proposal to transform the former Riverbend and Bigelow schools into intergenerational housing. The board, at its most recent meeting, voted unanimously

to approve the site plan for the development proposed by NewVue Affordable Housing Corporation of Fitchburg. The cost of turning former classrooms and offices into apartments, as well as constructing a new building on site to accommodate additional units and community space, has been estimated at as much as \$30 million.

Parking gets revised

The site plan approved was the second presented to the board for its approval. It includes a revised parking plan that addresses concerns some BPCD members had regarding traffic safety on Congress Street and Park Avenue. It's anticipated that fewer daily vehicle trips on average, some 288, will be generated by the new development than was the case when the schools were open.

The revised parking layout also reduces the number of handicap parking spaces from six to four, which had concerned board member Rick Hayden. However, the latest version does away with the necessity for residents and visitors with mobility issues to cross the parking lot in order to get to the new structure, which will connect the two former schools. All handicap spots will now abut the walkways immediately adjacent to each building.

The new parking plan also makes room for a vegetative strip parallel to the street, both increasing pedestrian safety and decreasing the amount of impervious area. The reduction in impervious paving reduces the amount of storm water runoff that results from the parking lot.

Before voting on the site plan, Hayden did express some skepticism regarding the number of parking spaces provided for the complex. He said the calculation that parking to accommodate 1.23 vehicles per unit seemed inadequate.

"I just wonder," said Hayden, "if they took into account the fact that 33 of these apartments are going to be two- or three-bedroom apartments when they came up with 1.23 number."

"Yes, we did," said Don Rhodes of CHA Consulting, the architect on the project. "We did the calculation two different ways to show that we were providing more than adequate parking: one was just treating everything as multifamily, and then one was treating it as if it was all senior housing, which would require much less parking than multifamily. We wanted to show that, even at the higher number, we were meeting the parking threshold."

When Hayden continued to express concern, Rhodes said, "Nobody wants to have this under-parked or push parking to the street. So, we made sure we provided more than what is required by the ITE (Institute of Transportation Engineers)."

One interesting condition imposed on the developer relates to the fate of a large, old tree on the property which must be felled to make way for the new building. The board is requiring that NewVue come up with a plan for re-use of the wood from the

tree. One option, suggested by Athol Director of Planning and Development Eric Smith, would be to contribute the wood to the town's wood bank.

At a public informational meeting in December, Anne Reitmeyer of NewVue Communities said the current estimated cost of the project is around \$30 million. She said the project will be paid for through a number of funding sources, including various tax credits and state and federal programs. Because of the time it will take to put financing together, it's unlikely ground will be broken on the project until 2022 or 2023.

Unoccupied since 2015

The Riverbend and Bigelow schools have been unoccupied since 2015. The property was purchased by NewVue last fall for \$25,000. Plans presented at that time indicated the new development would consist of 20 one-bedroom units, 24 two-bedroom units, and 9 three-bedroom units.

Reitmeyer in December said some units would be set aside for what is known as "workforce housing." Those units will be rented to families who earn between 80 percent and 110 percent of AMI — area median income. The remaining units will be made available to those considered low and/or very low income.

Before moving forward, the project still must go before the town's Zoning Board of Appeals to address several issues.