

Working for the workforce

Written by Matt Kanner

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Portsmouth considers middle class housing complex

Portsmouth's Blue Ribbon Committee on Housing issued a lengthy report in November emphasizing the need for affordable housing for the city's middleclass workers. The report calls on city officials to play a leadership role in advocating for the creation of more workforce housing units.

The Committee's efforts may soon bear fruit. The city is considering a proposal for a 60-unit workforce housing complex off Islington Street. Tentatively called Bartlett Place, the proposed five-story building would be located at 30 Cate St., at the corner of Cate and Bartlett streets. The proposal from MertonAlan Investments includes 16 artist living and working spaces and a total of 44 one- and two-bedroom rental units.

The term "workforce housing" refers to rental or owner occupied properties that are affordable for families earning between 80 and 120 percent of the area's median income. That's between \$61,500 and \$92,760 per year for a family of four; \$55,350 and \$83,484 for a family of three; \$49,200 and \$74,208 for a family of two; and \$43,050 and \$64,932 for one person.

"Affordable housing," by contrast, refers to housing for lower-income families earning less than 60 percent of the area's median family income. That's a maximum of less than \$46,380 for a family of four.

At the proposed workforce housing complex on Cate Street, occupants of the artist spaces would be required to fall into the one-person income bracket. Renters of one-bedroom apartments would have to land in the two-person family criteria and renters of two-bedroom units would need to meet the three-person family requirements.

City manager John Bohenko said Portsmouth has already made strides in providing affordable housing options for families with low to moderate incomes. Roughly half of the city's housing consists of rental units, and about 20 percent of the rental stock is federally subsidized housing for lower income residents. The city has close to 900 housing units that benefit from subsidies—more than half of which are exclusively for senior citizens.

Now the city must focus on providing housing for middleclass citizens who work in the Portsmouth area and would like to live here. "The point is that in order to continue to thrive and have our economy thrive, we need to have places for people to live," Bohenko said.

City Councilor Chris Dwyer, chair of the Blue Ribbon Committee on Housing, agrees. She said that while employment in Portsmouth has increased dramatically in recent years, the city's population has remained around 20,000. Housing development for middle-income people has not reflected economic growth.

"We really haven't been adding that much to the available housing stock really in any of the income levels," Dwyer said, noting that some 7,000 jobs have been created at Pease Tradeport alone. "Because Pease is not in the heart of our city, we tend to forget how many jobs have been created at Pease."

Currently, Portsmouth offers few incentives for private developers to build workforce housing facilities. The Portsmouth City Council plans to address that issue soon. The Council will hold a work session before its regular meeting on Monday, Jan. 26, to consider measures that would create incentives for developers to construct below-market-rate units.

Dwyer said she supports the idea of putting money into a city trust fund to use toward housing, perhaps partnering with private developers to purchase land. Such partnerships would enable the city to maintain some control over rents and make sure they remain low.

Dwyer hopes the proposed Cate Street complex will inspire other developers to pursue workforce housing projects in the city. But the proposal still needs to clear a few hurdles. Because the site is currently zoned as industrial, the project requires several variances. It was scheduled to go before the Zoning Board of Adjustments on Jan. 20.

Lisa DeStefano of DeStefano Architects said that if the zoning variances are approved, the project will go before other land use boards, as well as traffic and safety and technical advisory committees, before consideration by the Portsmouth Planning Board. If approved, construction would begin in late spring or early summer and the building would be ready for occupancy by July 2010.

The proposed complex would also include 98 parking spaces, on-site laundry and a workout room. Workforce and affordable housing projects often run into opposition from surrounding residents, who worry about impacts on traffic, parking and noise. DeStefano said she has met with the property owner and many abutters and does not expect any problems.

Bartlett Place would make a dent in a housing shortage that calls for 500 new workforce units over the next five years, according to Dwyer. She plans to push for zoning rewrites in areas along Lafayette Road and Woodbury Avenue, creating "transit-oriented, mixed-use zoning" for large parcels abutting residential neighborhoods. She mentioned the former site of Yoken's Restaurant on Lafayette Road as an example of a parcel that could include workforce housing located along the COAST bus route. Housing located on bus routes offers greener and cheaper transportation options, she said.

The City Council has also been in conversations with the U.S. Air Force about utilizing more land at Pease Tradeport for affordable housing developments. Dwyer said she would also push for housing that accepts people who make between 60 and 80 percent of the area's median income—a bracket currently not accounted for in the definitions of affordable or workforce housing.

The housing demands in Portsmouth are similar to needs elsewhere in the Seacoast and across the state, according to Dick Ingram. After two years as executive director of The Housing Partnership in Portsmouth, Ingram recently accepted a position as executive director of the N.H. Retirement System. He started on Jan. 20.

Looking back on his time with The Housing Partnership, Ingram said his proudest accomplishment was spreading awareness about the need for workforce and affordable housing. He said the N.H. Legislature and individual municipalities are now more willing to engage the issue.

"It's fair to say over the last couple of years the issue of workforce housing and the needs of affordable housing have a much higher profile," he said. "We're in a position now where a proposal like the one on Cate Street can come from a private developer and have the city respond in a much better way."

Whereas Portsmouth once had more residents than it had jobs, the city now has more jobs than it has residents, Ingram said. The area offers a diverse array of jobs, with economic drivers like the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, Pease Tradeport, the University of New Hampshire, tourism and a number of high-tech industries nearby. The trick is enabling those employees to live close to where they work.

As former director of real estate Marty Chapman takes over as executive director of The Housing Partnership, the organization's biggest challenge will be to continue the momentum it has built. There are affordable or workforce housing projects scheduled to break ground soon in Rye, Rochester and Kennebunk, Maine, plus the proposal on Cate Street in Portsmouth. Ingram's housing dream is for every community in the area put a tangible proposal for affordable or workforce housing in front of its planning board.

The Portsmouth City Council's work session on Jan. 26 will be open to the public at the Dondero Council Chambers in City Hall at 1 Junkins Ave.