

Is senior housing plan good for Portsmouth?

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PORTSMOUTH — The idea of a 480-unit upscale senior housing project between Borthwick Avenue and Islington Street has raised concern among some residents who live near the proposed site.

Borthwick Forrest is proposed to be built on 37 acres, with units selling for between \$270,000 and \$450,000 to seniors age 62 and above.

Developers Kane Co. and Pro Con Inc. plan to build the facility next to Portsmouth Regional Hospital. The Planning Board last week agreed to draft a new zoning ordinance since the land is currently reserved for office research.

Mark Stebbins, CEO of Pro Con, Inc. said at the Planning Board meeting last week that office buildings would be assessed at \$24 million, while a market rate senior facility would be assessed at \$130 million.

Attorney Malcolm McNeill represents Borthwick Forrest and says an annual \$1.26 million tax revenue will go to Portsmouth if the facility is built.

Ralph Dibernardo of Islington Street is concerned the city will not benefit enough from the project.

"I thought one function of zoning was to get the best use of property for the city, not the developer," said Dibernardo.

Paul Mannle, also of Islington Street, had a similar sentiment.

"It's their property, they can do what they want with it," said Paul Mannle of Islington Street. "I'm just against changing land zoning law to increase a developer's profit."

Mannle's other concerns are that if the zoning is rewritten, it could set a precedent for other Portsmouth areas to be rezoned at developers' request and that the city should get more out of the deal.

Not everyone was displeased at the thought of senior housing on the land.

"I have no problem with it," said Linda Hussey of Islington Street. "I think that Michael Kane is looking out for Portsmouth."

Demographics expert Peter Francese disagreed. He believes the new age-selective community will have a huge negative impact on Portsmouth.

"It will further unbalance the age distribution in Portsmouth and cause major issues in future years regarding school votes, shopping, you name it," said Francese.

Dick Ingram, executive director of Housing Partnership, would like to see young people move into the Portsmouth homes of senior citizens who sell them to move into Borthwick Forrest.

"With senior citizens moving into housing like that, we need to make sure houses then jump a generation," said Ingram.

The Housing Partnership is a community-based nonprofit affordable housing developer and provider of housing related services.

Francese, however, does not think the senior facility will open up much housing in the city. "Three-fourths of them (Borthwick Forrest residents) will not be from Portsmouth," he said.

According to Francese, history has shown with similar facilities that the majority of new residents come from out of state.

Despite the possibility of the facility being built if the zoning is changed, Dibernardo still has faith in the system.

"I'm realist when it comes to City Council," he said. "If it goes through in the end, it will have gone through boards and committees to get there."