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Maple Woods in the works in Wenham

Wenham residents will likely be voting on two articles related to affordable senior housing proposed for 62 Maple St. at the 2015 Annual Town Meeting in April.

The current proposed amounts are \$975,000 from the Community Preservation funds set aside for affordable housing, and \$850,000 from the Affordable Housing Trust, which expends funds only for affordable housing initiatives. The amounts are not final until printed in the Town Meeting warrant.

Initial plans for the Maple Woods senior affordable housing project were in process for the 2014 town meeting; however, the developer, Harborlight Community Partners of Beverly, voluntarily withdrew the requests – despite favorable reactions by the Affordable Housing Trust and Community Preservation Committee – because of resident claims that they had not received enough information about the proposed 60-unit development and “out of respect for the town’s process,” according to Harborlight’s Executive Director Andrew DeFranza.

Providing information

Harborlight Community Partners (HCP) has attempted to rectify the lack of available information to residents. In a recent interview with DeFranza, he said that he had extended invitations to speak privately with all the abutters, most of whom accepted. HCP has hosted walks of the site where the development is planned, off 62 Maple St., on what is currently private property. Information and articles and press coverage of the progress are listed on the organization’s web site, <http://www.harborlightcp.org/news/current-projects/maple-woods-a-wenham-senior-housing-project/>. If a person contacts him directly, by phone or email, DeFranza said he will return the contact with answers to specific questions. Contact him by email at adefranza@harborlightcp.org or call him at 978-922-1305, ext. 207.

Harborlight Community Partners is a collaboration of a number of smaller local organizations and groups who have been working locally for over 50 years into one non-profit organization with a mission to “provide housing with services primarily for low- and moderate-income people living in Southern Essex County,” according to its web site. DeFranza said most of the housing developed so far is affordable senior housing. Several of these facilities are in operation around the North Shore: Rockport’s Pigeon Cove Ledges and Rockport High School Apartments;



The entrance to the proposed 60-unit Maple Woods affordable housing project. Courtesy photo.

Whipple Riverview Place in Ipswich; and Turtle Creek and Turtle Woods in Beverly. The organization also administers buildings for assisted living, individual living (apartments), and family living (single-family homes), with two sites operating in the Hamilton-Wenham community: a condominium on Friend Court in Wenham; and Firehouse Place in Hamilton, with apartments.

Plans for Wenham

On Maple Street in Wenham, HCP is proposing to purchase 3.5 acres from a private landowner and hire contractors to build 60 units of age-restricted affordable senior housing. Construction would be in two phases of 30 units each. All buildings will be below the 35-foot height limit required in town for residential buildings.

DeFranza said 60 is the lowest number of units to ensure full-time staff at the site. Maple Woods is smaller than Wenham's Enon Village, which has 84 units, and larger than either Maples or Boulders. Each unit is a 650-square-foot, one-bedroom apartment.

Originally HCP planned to restrict the age to 62; however, state preferences for providing subsidies for family housing resulted in the decision to lower the age to 55. This allows an age- and income-eligible senior to have a family member, usually a spouse, who is not yet 55 to share the apartment, so long as the second adult is 18 years or older. If state funding priorities change, the age restriction may return to 62.

People with disabilities can live at Maple Woods, if they meet the age and income requirements first. People from Wenham can live at Maple Woods, also if they meet the age and income requirements. According to the website, the facility will have two levels of income eligibility: "A portion of the units would be reserved for people below 30 percent of area median income (one person \$19,800, two people \$22,600); A portion of the units would be reserved for people below 60 percent of area median income (one person \$39,540, two people \$45,180)".

DeFranza confirmed that currently no units are reserved specifically for Wenham residents because of the need to fill the apartments as quickly as possible and state priorities. Other HCP facilities also do not have "local preference" set asides for current residents of the host community.

On-site services will include a residence manager and grounds and facility manager, contracted homemaker-health aides to provide services as needed to elderly residents, and a part-time social worker. A van will be available to transport Maple Woods residents who no longer drive. DeFranza confirmed that the majority of current residents of Harborlight's senior affordable housing are "widows on fixed incomes." For example, he said that most residents at Turtle Woods in Beverly are single females with an income under \$16,000 per year.

Wiping out 40B

Currently, HCP is applying for a comprehensive permit from the town of Wenham, under Massachusetts regulations known as Chapter 40B. A 40B application allows developers who ensure that at least 25 percent of the units are "affordable" to be exempted from local zoning regulations, usually for density (smaller acreage). Only those municipalities with the state-mandated 10 percent affordable housing are exempt from the 40B comprehensive permit process. Wenham has not yet achieved 10 percent; however, approval of the comprehensive permit for Maple Woods would put the town well over the 10 percent minimum; and the units would be counted toward the town's total as soon as the permit is signed, not later when the facility opens for operation.

Demographics

DeFranza provided a handout on key facts known about the demographics of rapidly increasing aging population. More people, the "baby boomer" generation, are in their 60s now; people are living longer; and family structures

begin to shift once the parents reach the age of 50. Once older people have retired, their income remains “fixed” to a large extent; however, the costs of owning one’s own home increase at a more rapid rate than Social Security and retirement account income. Older adults often choose to reduce health, home maintenance and food costs in order to afford to stay in a home. The situation worsens when a newly widowed person attempts to stay at home on half or less of the income the couple had. Issues mount when the older person experiences health issues requiring accessibility (stairs to enter the residence and to access the second-floor bedrooms) with no funds to pay for home adaptation. These are the people who need affordable housing.

Currently on the North Shore, need and demand for affordable senior housing outstrips the availability. Even at Harborlight properties, the waiting list for available units can be up to two years, said DeFranza. When contacted by email, Jim Reynolds, Director of Wenham’s Council on Aging, said, “People from Wenham have as good a chance as anyone if they meet the income and age requirements, and we need this kind of housing for the future rather desperately.”

Funding

HCP asks for community funding on all of its properties during the development process, to demonstrate community commitment to the project. Wenham is in the position of having money already set aside for affordable housing, through Community Preservation funds and the Affordable Housing Trust, without having to increase the tax rate on current residents.

Other funding sources include rental vouchers — only available if the minimum age is 55 — and one of six or so types of state capital, in the form of tax credits with federal funds allocated by the state.

The funding structure for operating HCP developments are varied according to what options were available through state and federal funds at the time of the development; DeFranza is still developing funding channels for the proposed Maple Woods project.

HCP will be paying taxes on all its buildings and lands, and is anticipated to contribute approximately \$50,000 a year to Wenham’s tax base. In other benefits to the town, beyond tax revenue, the number of affordable units at Maple Woods would allow the town protection from future comprehensive permits; and the age restriction prohibits school-age students living on the premises, the most recognized cost burden to a town’s budget.

The HCP website also suggests that the site’s meeting rooms can be used as an emergency shelter for that area of town and can host emergency communications equipment for Wenham’s police and fire services.

In terms of burdens to the town, the proposed facility will be an additional demand for emergency services from the police and fire departments, for 911 calls. The site expects to do its own building and grounds maintenance, as well as plowing the access road and parking area, and removing resident trash, recycling, and leaves. Staff and residents will have relationships with the local Council on Aging; however, the site will provide resident transportation in addition to Wenham’s existing senior van transportation.

Environmental concerns

The biggest issues facing the development are environmental — and the issues of most concern to some residents. The building is just over 50 feet from wetlands, out of the “no build” zone, but still in the 100-foot buffer zone.

Other concerns focus on septic and wastewater treatment; and demand on drinking water.

The HCP website states how the organization is dealing with these issues. Meridien Engineering is developing a drainage plan to collect water draining from the roof and parking area surface into an underground storage facility.

The septic system is located under the parking lot and beyond, on the other side of the building away from the wetlands, well out of even the 100-foot buffer zone.

CG Engineering of Hamilton is developing the plan, which utilizes a Waterloo Biofilter System, which will “exceed Title V requirements,” said DeFranza. For more on this state-of-the-art system, visit www.waterloo-biofilter.com.

Water supply

Wenham’s water comes from wells, fed by aquifers, which studies from the Ipswich River Watershed Association (IRWA) claim are part of the Ipswich River watershed. According to IRWA’s web page, www.ipswichriver.org, the Ipswich River has been identified as one of the most threatened rivers in the state. It flows through 21 communities, including Hamilton but not Wenham, from its headwaters in Wilmington and Andover to its outlet to the ocean in Ipswich.

DeFranza is working with staff at the IRWA to create a “net zero” demand on drinking water. The plan calls for Harborlight to contribute water conservation devices and equipment to the town to be distributed to other residences to keep the water usage rate stable, even after the addition of 60 more households. In addition, landscaping at Maple Woods will use only native, drought-resistant species of plants that require little watering.

Traffic and lighting

Other potential issues of concern to the neighborhood include lighting and traffic, which HCP is also in the process of addressing, according to DeFranza and the web page. Lighting will be designed to keep “light pollution” for neighbors at a minimum. The online material contains a link to a traffic study by MDM Transportation Consultants, Inc., which concludes that the increase in traffic amounts to one additional vehicle per 1.5 minutes, during peak traffic conditions, which is not expected to “materially impact operating conditions along Maple Street.”

Keeping up to date

Residents wishing to keep abreast of progress of the process for this development should attend meetings of Wenham’s Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA), which is responsible for approval of the comprehensive permit, and the Conservation Commission for approval of construction within the 100-foot buffer zone to wetlands. Meetings and agendas will be posted to the town’s web page and calendar, www.wenhamma.gov. Updates will also be available on the HCP web site.

DeFranza welcomes questions and comments: email Andrew DeFranza at adefranza@harborlightcp.org or call him at 978-922-1305 ext. 207.

<http://hamilton.wickedlocal.com/article/20141210/NEWS/141219516>