

Developer shares new affordable housing plan with Wilmette residents



Richard Koenig, executive director of Northbrook-based Housing Opportunities Development Corporation, talks Sept. 7 to Wilmette residents about the revised affordable housing proposal HODC wants to build in the village on the site of the former American Legion post. (Kathy Routliffe / Pioneer Press)

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Northbrook-based Housing Opportunities Development Corporation has shifted its affordable housing focus in Wilmette to larger apartments and family tenants, taking its cue from opponents' requests, the organization's head told residents on Wednesday.

Externally, the project would resemble the one HODC dropped last fall in the face of neighborhood opposition, HODC Executive Director Richard Koenig said during a one-hour public meeting at the Community Recreation Center in Wilmette – a three-story apartment building at 1925 Wilmette Ave., where the former Wilmette American Legion Post 46 now stands.

On the inside, however, it would have 16 one- and two-bedroom apartments instead of the 20 studios and one-bedroom units HODC originally planned, he said.

"We've redesigned the building to target families," Koenig told an audience of roughly 30 people. He said he hoped to bring the newly proposed Cleland Place – named after the late Wilmette fair housing activist Jean Cleland – to the Wilmette Plan Commission sometime in the next couple of months.

If the plan commission and, later, Wilmette's village board, approve the project, HODC must still acquire financing before construction can start, he said: "The village process could take a year, so progress on this is counted in years, not in days."

Other changes to the proposal include enclosing 16 of the building's ground-floor parking spots rather than leaving them open, and having four outdoor parking spots on the property, plus four more dedicated parking spots at an adjacent shopping center, Koenig said. Increasing the number of parking stalls to 24 eliminates the need to ask Wilmette for parking spot variances, he said.

He also said increasing HODC staff time at the building by making its first-floor office a satellite office for the organization, and putting security cameras inside the building, should address some of the security concerns opponents aired last November, when the original proposal was presented to the plan commission.

Koenig withdrew that plan shortly after the meeting, at which foes packed the room to complain that the building would lower neighborhood property values, add traffic near its location, would fail to prioritize low-income Wilmette residents, and could bring people into the village who could be criminals.

He later held public meetings to seek neighborhood input, and this summer signaled his intention to bring a revised project to the village. On Aug. 23 he sent a so-called "pre-application" package to the village's community development department, and set two public information sessions.

Some of the original plan remains in the new proposal; Koenig said Wednesday that apartments will still be marketed to low-income individuals and families whose annual income is no more than 60 percent of area median income, with rents of \$615 and \$800 respectively for one- and two-bedroom units.

Although federal law prohibits specific quotas for Wilmette residents, HODC will first market Cleland Place in the Wilmette area in an effort to reach local residents and people who work in Wilmette, he said. The building will have at least two fully handicapped accessible units for disabled tenants, he said, and there will also be units set aside for veterans who meet income requirements.

He told listeners that Wilmette regulations limit the 530 to 542-square-foot one bedroom units and the 705 to 714-square-foot two bedroom units to no more than two people per bedroom.

Koenig went over HODC's screening procedures, which he said will weed out prospective tenants with felony convictions, or who are sex offenders. He said HODC screening, and eviction procedures for people who break tenant rules, are strict.

"We wouldn't do anything less than (private landlords) and probably more," he said. "We have more people looking over our shoulders."

He also assured questioners the HODC has no plans to buy more property or change the current project to build a larger apartment building.

"This is the building I want to build. This is really, really, truly what I want to do. I'm not trying to bait and switch," he said.

A second HODC presentation is set for 7 p.m. Tuesday, also at the recreation center, 3000 Glenview Road.

The HODC pre-application package is available to view on the village of Wilmette website, at www.wilmette.com/2016/08/31/1925-wilmette-ave-hodc-application/.

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