

School apartments closer to reality

By **Jeb Bobseine/Staff Writer**

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SHARON - If all goes well, developers will break ground at the old Wilber School site by the fall on a rehabilitation and renewal project that would result in a 79-space mixed-income rental facility in the long-vacant former town high school.

Developers made a presentation before the Zoning Board of Appeals on March 12, but the case was continued due to concerns over the size and appearance of the project, according to ZBA Chairman John Lee. The next hearing is scheduled for April 23.

Though only around 20-percent of the proposed one and two-bedroom spaces would be classified as affordable – meaning they're available only to households at or below 50-percent of the area median income – all 79 would be counted as affordable in the town's subsidized housing inventory, according to developers.

This figure needs to rise to 10-percent of the town's total housing number to ensure no so-called “unfriendly 40Bs” – unappealing or unwanted developments – may enter Sharon.

Because of other projects in town, officials have a two-year window to deny projects.

It sits at just over 6 percent right now, up from around 1.5-percent in 2000.

The current building, located on a 3.7-acre site at 75 South Main St., has been vacant since the 1980s. Boston-based Beacon Communities Services and Canton-based Frontier Enterprises, Inc. propose to jointly renovate the existing Colonial Revival structure, and add a wing at the rear.

One acre will go to the town for conservation purposes, under the current proposal, leaving a 2.7 acre footprint for the proposed facility.

But as Beacon Communities representative Joe Timilty stressed, the project hasn't been approved. Right now, Timilty said, “we don't have a project.”

At the last ZBA meeting, Beacon addressed most of the board's concerns, Timilty said. But they want some more answers, he added.

Some of the answers may come in the form of peer-reviews of various issues surrounding the proposed project: wastewater, stormwater, sound, and traffic, according to Lee.

Earth Tech is conducting the peer-reviews, Lee said. The international consulting firm has previously done a number of peer-reviews for the town, he added.

The project is also waiting for approval from certain state organizations, Timilty said. These include the Department of Environmental Protection and the Massachusetts Historical Commission, he said.

A groundwater discharge permit application for the proposed sewer treatment facility is pending from the DEP, the developer said.

The state Historical Commission recently deemed the building, built in 1922, historically significant. It will likely

be individually placed on the National Register of Historic Places, according to the developer.

The developer also hopes to apply for a Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED, certification, which comes through the US Green Building Council.

Lee described it as a program to have projects conform to environmental standards. He called it a “good thing” for Sharon.

One of the previous concerns of the ZBA was the on-site wastewater. But at this point, Lee said, it seems to be a good design. It’s not a concern of the ZBA now, he added. Eight Wilber School neighbors will be connected to the wastewater treatment facility that would be built on the site, he said.

It’s taken some give-and-take between the town and the developer, but board and community feedback has been largely positive, Timilty said.

From a purely development standpoint a vacant lot would be more attractive, Timilty said. But the restoration of the exterior will retain the building’s historic features as much as possible, he stressed.

Beyond the historic significance there is the town’s “emotional attachment” to the structure, he said.

“It’s the front tooth of the downtown,” he said.

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