

PHA workforce housing plan targets those earning \$30-50K

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Portsmouth Housing Authority Executive Director Craig Welch shared more information about what the rents are likely to be at the agency's proposed 68-unit downtown housing development.

About two-thirds of the units at the proposed Court Street development will rent to people who earn 60 percent or less of the area median income, Welch said during Wednesday night's Historic District Commission meeting.

Using 2017 numbers, a single person earning \$37,500 would qualify for one of those units, Welch said. Those units will rent for no more than \$950 per month, including utilities, Welch said in response to questions from the HDC. The PHA's goal for the rest of the units is for them to "trail market rate," Welch said.

HDC Vice Chairman John Wyckoff pressed Welch for more details and described "trail market rate" as a "very vague term."

Welch responded that if the apartments were built today, a one-bedroom so-called market rate unit would rent for a little more than \$1,200 a month, including utilities. The cost for a two-bedroom would be a little more than \$1,500, he said.

HDC Chairman Vince Lombardi thanked Welch for the information, calling it "very helpful."

Earlier in the meeting, Welch told the HDC the housing authority is "really invested in developing something that fits within the context of this neighborhood."

The PHA is also seeking to develop a mixed-income property to be able to help revitalize a city tradition where “people of all incomes and all professions have been able to live in the downtown area.”

“That’s increasingly rare now,” Welch stated during the workshop meeting.

He also stressed as a “local nonprofit organization, we have zero interest in making a profit off this development.”

“Basically, we’re building something that will be affordable to people who make between \$30,000 and \$50,000 a year,” Welch said. “We think that’s a product that doesn’t exist in downtown Portsmouth.”

He added the PHA is “extremely sensitive to” the possibility of finding important archaeological resources on the site. “We’ve engaged archeologists very early in this process,” Welch said.

Unlike the PHA’s other properties, people who rent at the Court Street building will not receive subsidies, he said.

“We still think we can serve a group of people, while not qualifying for subsidies, still don’t have an affordable place in Portsmouth to live,” Welch said.

Resident Barbara DeStefano spoke in support of the project during the public hearing portion of Wednesday’s meeting, saying lower-cost housing is needed in Portsmouth.

“I like the idea of a combination of people. This is the perfect place for a project like this,” she said. “It looks good. It’s not going to block anybody’s view. I think it should go through with no issues.”

Resident Sandra Dika called the proposed development “a very exciting opportunity,” adding “We desperately need this housing.”

Architect Carla Goodknight, who’s working with the PHA, previously said they “are proposing a 4-story residential (building) over a story of parking and a lower level of parking.”

“We’re allowed 45 (feet) by right with public open space, which we do have,” she said at the last HDC meeting. “We would be looking for an additional 15 feet (through a variance).”

The plan calls for building the development on Court Street on what is now a parking lot between Central Fire Station and PHA’s Feaster Apartments. An historic house at the front of the lot would be preserved while office space behind the house would be razed.

The PHA is also proposing a stepped-down liner building in front of the housing development, which would come almost up to the sidewalk. There will also be a “pocket park” between the liner building and historic home, Goodknight said.

The HDC voted to continue the work session portion of its review of the project until its April meeting.