

Lansing council OKs \$15M affordable housing project at School for the Blind campus



Written by
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The former administration building on the campus of the Michigan School for the Blind will be revived as affordable housing units under a \$15 million plan approved Monday.

Lansing City Council voted 5-2 to approve the project for the building known as the Abigail. Fourth Ward Councilwoman Jessica Yorke was absent.

First Ward Councilwoman Jody Washington and at-large Councilwoman Carol Wood cast opposing votes. Wood said she was not necessarily against the project, but wanted more information from the developer that hadn't yet been presented

Washington said she is concerned about multiple demographics — families, individuals, people who are homeless or those with disabilities — possibly sharing common hallways and entrances.

She said she would be more likely to support the project if she had “ironclad” assurances the management company would be on site and responsive to potential problems, and that supportive services are guaranteed to be offered to residents.

“Don't put it out there that Jody Washington hates poor people. That couldn't be further from the truth,” she said. “I'd be more on board if this were townhouses (or) cottages, if we had a vision for the rest of the property.”

Harbor Springs-based G.A. Haan Development plans to renovate the Abigail Building near Pine and Maple streets to include 44 apartment units for low- to moderate-income tenants. The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development limits rent based on income and family size. Renters would have to meet income guidelines to qualify.

People earning 30 percent, 40 percent and 60 percent of the area's median income — \$64,200 this year in Ingham County, HUD data show — would be eligible to move into the apartments.

Among Washington's concerns was the health of surrounding neighborhoods, which include Knollwood Willow, Old Forest and Walnut. Adjacent neighborhoods already have a number of properties for low- and moderate-income residents, she said.

Yet officials in Mayor Virg Bernero's administration said the project will add diversity to the area's population base, support the neighborhoods by adding stable housing options and spur redevelopment elsewhere on the School for the Blind site.

"It will bring stability to the neighborhood," said Randy Hannan, Bernero's executive assistant. "That's not rich by any means, but it's also not poor, and it really gives people the kind of housing that can be something that people can afford. And it creates a diverse mix of tenancy."

In addition, local human services agencies like the Abigail concept and have said they're interested in providing supportive services to residents that can improve their wellbeing, said Joan Jackson Johnson, Lansing's human relations and community services director.

Haan's development director Ben Ide said his firm would attempt to preserve the building's historic character, to the extent it is cost-effective.

Haan won't hire a security service to patrol the property, but cameras will be installed, Ide said. A manager will live on site and hold part-time office hours. Tenants will have key cards and secure entrances, he said.

Now that it's approved, developers say the project is expected to break ground next year.

The project is contingent on developers receiving some incentives. Haan's request for more than \$11 million in low-income housing tax credits from the Michigan State Housing Development Authority recently was rejected, which affects another \$500,000 in related supportive housing funds from the agency.

Developers plan to reapply in October, Ide said.

The Abigail was used as the school's administration building until it closed in 1995.

Its current condition is holding back developers, said Bob Johnson, Lansing's planning and neighborhood development director. Market conditions also will dictate what happens on the site, including a former high school building near the Abigail, Johnson said.

As part of the project, council members approved a payment in lieu of taxes from the developer, which works out to 4 percent of the project's gross rent minus tenant-paid utilities. A dollar amount was not available Monday.

The so-called PILOT payment is allowed under state law — Public Act 346 of 1966 — intended for affordable housing projects that benefit from federal housing funding or low-income housing tax credits, among other incentives.

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