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Former Phelps School rezoned

May 26, 2012

Johanna Boyle - Journal Ishpeming Bureau (jboyle@miningjournal.net) , The Mining Journal

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ISHPEMING - The Ishpeming City Council voted unanimously Friday to change the zoning of the property housing the former C.L. Phelps Middle School building to multiple-family residential, allowing a possible housing project to move forward.

The council took the action at a special meeting attended by about 20 members of the public.

"I think it's a positive thing for the city," said Ben Ide, representative for G.A. Haan Development, the downstate company that is hoping to turn the former school building into a 24-unit housing complex using the state's low income housing tax credit. "Leaving the building as is left no hope for the Phelps school."

The Ishpeming Public Schools recently approved a conditional purchase agreement with G.A. Haan for \$200,000, provided the zoning change was approved and that the development company receives the tax credit it will be applying for in August.

Although the project has raised concerns from neighboring residents over crime and traffic, council members offered positive comments regarding the project.

"I truly believe we will get people from Champion, Michigamme, Negaunee and Marquette," said Councilwoman Elaine Racine, speaking in favor of the project and the rezoning prior to the vote. "That's what we're looking for - more people."

Earlier this week, Racine traveled to Sault Ste. Marie where G.A. Haan refurbished a historic bank building into a similar housing complex using the same tax credit program.

"This place is unbelievable," Racine said. "We aren't talking an older home, framed house in Ishpeming where someone's going to throw some cheap carpet on the floor and some cheap paint on the walls."

Racine said she checked with area business owners in Sault Ste. Marie as to their reaction to that housing project, and she said they had nothing but good things to report.

Councilman Mike Tall said he had checked with the Ishpeming City Police Department regarding the volume of calls to the larger apartment complexes in the city and said he was told most calls are sent to single-family or two-family buildings, not the large complexes.

"I'm not going to tell you there's no calls because if you put two people in a cardboard box, you're going to have a policeman refereeing in there sooner or later," Tall said. "The multi-family situations, if they're run with a manager, they can be very little problem to the community. If they're allowed to run rampant, guess what, people will be people."

"It's too nice a building to smash down and make a parking lot out of."

Mayor Pat Scanlon agreed, arguing many of the problems the city has with rental properties could be solved through landlords.

"We're pre-judging low income," Scanlon said. "The fact is the



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Above, Ishpeming City Council member Elaine Ra...



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problem isn't with the tenants. The problem's with the landlords... I can go and name five people who came to our community and bought up all this property for next to nothing and do nothing with it."

Despite the positive comments from council members, several members of the public spoke with concerns about the project.

"We're not worried about who is going to develop it. We're worried about going to mutli-family and what is going to happen with multi-family," Ishpeming resident Mike Tonkin said. "We live in an area that already has a lot of rentals and we're showing the effects of it now... We're getting to be known as the drug capital of Marquette County."

Tonkin said while there were many positives of the project, concerns still remain.

The next step for G.A. Haan is to carry out inspections of the building and apply for the low income housing tax credit in August. The state gives notice of the award in October, with final closing on the building expected in May of 2013. With a 12-month construction schedule, Ide said the project could begin leasing in May of 2014.

In other action, the council approved a resolution tentatively creating a special assessment to allow the city to repair streets on the 2012 portion of the city's five-year street improvement plan, splitting the cost with property owners adjacent to those streets. The preliminary approval is just one step in creating the assessment district, with further council action required.

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