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Blairsville housing complex gets tentative OK

By Jeff Himler

BLAIRSVILLE DISPATCH

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BLAIRSVILLE -- Borough Council has tentatively approved a plan by Pittsburgh-based Trek Development Group to construct a new housing complex for low- and moderate-income residents at the former community pool site along Grandview Avenue.

According to Trey Barbour, project manager for Trek, the developer expects to spend \$5 to \$6 million to complete an initial phase of 24 housing units at the site, which is currently owned by the borough. The project is being financed through tax credits approved in July by the Pennsylvania Housing Finance Agency. Room has been set aside for another 24 units if additional funding becomes available.

Trek plans to develop the units in partnership with the Indiana County Housing Authority, which has an option to take over ownership of the former pool site. That land transfer is contingent on the housing authority similarly turning over its existing Conemaugh Terrace housing facility along West Market Street to the borough.

Borough planners have suggested including the current Conemaugh Terrace property in a proposed private development that could add more than 40 homes on the western end of town.

Barbour explained its proposed new housing units, dubbed Grandview Point, are intended as a potential replacement for the 24 units that would be lost at Conemaugh Terrace.

According to Barbour, current residents at the Conemaugh facility would have the option of relocating to the Grandview complex but would not be required to.

"We are providing this as an option to the (Conemaugh Terrace) residents," Barbour said of the Grandview complex. "We are building it to meet their needs."

Rent at Conemaugh Terrace is subsidized for seniors and others qualifying under the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) Section 8 program. That would not be the case for the Grandview units -- which would, however, have maximum annual income limits for residents and rent that is meant to be affordable.

Project architect Tom Harley of Indiana said the new complex would include

eight single-bedroom units and 16 two-bedroom units featuring a single-story, cottage-style design each with its own porch. Barbour said monthly rent would be set at \$500 for a single-bedroom unit and \$600 for one with two bedrooms.

Harley said the project also includes a community building, where residents could clean laundry and receive mail, and such exterior amenities as sidewalks, curbs and trees.

"We're very excited about the project," said Barbour, who is hoping to begin construction by January and have units ready for tenants next fall, weather permitting.

But, before the housing project can move forward, borough officials explained, Trek must make a separate application for final approval from council, possibly by next month. Also, borough manager Tim Evans noted the Indiana County Housing Authority requires authorization from HUD officials for the proposed closure of Conemaugh Terrace.

Council granted the tentative approval unanimously, with John Bertolino absent. The approval followed a public hearing on the matter held Tuesday evening during council's regular monthly meeting.

Blairsville resident Joan Reynolds expressed concern that the move from Conemaugh Terrace, located in the borough's downtown area, to Grandview Point on the eastern outskirts of the community might cause hardships for Conemaugh tenants.

"It's going to force them to spend more money on public transportation," she said, while adding that being removed from the center of town may curtail the activities of some who collect bottles for recycling and to supplement their income.

Council President Ron Evanko indicated those displaced by closure of Conemaugh Terrace would receive Section 8 vouchers that could be used toward rental of any available housing unit throughout the county.

Reynolds questioned whether the Conemaugh residents have had a chance to express any concerns they may have about the proposed relocation.

Barbour indicated county housing authority executive director Kelly Hicks "met individually with every resident," and he noted a common concern was about the availability of a bus stop at the new housing site. It was suggested the developer check with county transit authority officials about adding a stop for the Grandview site.

"A logical place to stop would be at the community building," Harley said.

Council member Carolyn Smith expressed concern that the proposed Grandview housing would displace two of three public tennis courts currently at the borough site. She suggested the problem could have been avoided if the planned housing units had remained more centrally located on the

borough site rather than being shifted toward the north end of the property.

Harley indicated the shift was made to avoid a sloping portion of the site and to limit excavation work during construction.

Evans said he isn't too concerned about the potential loss of the courts, which are in "pretty bad shape" and in need of replacement. He suggested there might be an opportunity to develop new courts on borough property near the Blairsville Community Center on North Lane.

Council member Mary Ugoletti observed that the courts are not heavily used: "I play there every week, and I'm the only one there."

Ed Smith, a member of the local Blairsville-Saltsburg School Board and the husband of Carolyn Smith, asked about potential improvements to the former pool bathhouse at the Grandview site. The structure currently is used as a locker room for teams that play on the school district's football stadium, which is located on the opposite side of Grandview Avenue.

Barbour said the developer currently has insufficient funds to do anything other than making landscaping improvements around the locker facility and the remaining tennis court. He said Trek is open to working with the borough to seek out additional funding for upgrading the locker area.

Ed Smith suggested it would be better to relocate the locker facility near one of the end zones of the field. Otherwise, when a youth football team uses the field, "You're going to have a lot of 5- and 6-year-olds up around your homes," he told Barbour.

Robert Cravener asked how the Grandview development would affect the property values of his home and those of neighbors on a section of East Brown Street located near the proposed housing units.

Carolyn Smith said her property hasn't been negatively affected by being located near the Blairview Apartments off old Rt. 22.

It was noted there will be a landscaped buffer between the housing complex and neighboring homes.

Along with tentative plans for Grandview Point, council approved several variances the project will require from normal standards for a planned residential development (PDR).

The complex will sit on a 7.5-acre property, less than the 10 acres required. Instead of deeding more property for the site, council approved a resolution setting aside an adjoining 2.5-acre section of borough property as green space.

With a potential total of 48 housing units, the complex also would exceed the normal maximum density of four units per acre.

Also, council granted a variance noting the complex will be set back less than the minimum 100 feet from bordering property lines.

In other business, council learned that an apparent low bid for improvements along Market Street came in far below the \$3.1 million in funding available for the project. Bids reportedly ranged from about \$1.9 million to \$2.9 million for enhancement of the Diamond intersection at Market and Liberty streets and streetscaping improvements on other sections of Market. The bids are being reviewed by PennDOT, which is administering a Pennsylvania Community Transportation Initiative grant for the project.

Evans will check with PennDOT officials to determine if additional improvements in the project area can be made with the leftover funding. If all goes well, he noted the successful bidder would be expected to begin work April 7.

Ugoletti suggested "getting rid of those nasty bumpouts" -- sections of sidewalk that extend into the parking lane as an intended "traffic calming" measure. The bumpouts were not well received following a previous streetscaping effort on Market.

Council hired two new part-time officers to help bolster the ranks of the borough police department. Added to the roster will be: Latrobe resident Robert Doperak, a former police chief in Saltsburg in 2007-08 who has also served in Seward and is a police academy instructor at Indiana University of Pennsylvania; David Angelo of Indiana, who also works as a part-time policeman in Elderton. The starting wage for part-time officers is \$8.42 per hour.

The hirings bring Blairsville's complement of officers to two full-timers and seven part-timers.

Council reappointed Jeff Helm to a seat on the Blairsville Community Development Authority board. Fellow BCDA board member Linda Gwinn noted the authority is planning its annual Comedy Night Live fundraising event for Feb. 26.

Karen Lauffer, who owns an apartment building on South Liberty Street, asked council to reconsider its vote last month to change the street number of her building from 175 to 165 S. Liberty St. Last month, Evans said the change would correct the fact that addresses on the street currently don't run in sequential order, which could be a hindrance to emergency responders.

Lauffer argued that borough and county 911 officials had known of the numbering irregularity for the past decade and had not recommended a change.

No new action was taken on the matter.

Council adopted a resolution indicating the borough will not need to make a

contribution to its police pension fund for 2011.

Mayor Joe Caugherty set trick-or-treating in the borough for 2 to 4 p.m. Oct. 31.

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