

WAY FINDERS

Mill St. 40B plan: 62 units in townhouses

Public meeting Thurs. to discuss housing plan

By Michael J. Ballway
 mballway@turley.com

Way Finders will reveal a plan for 62 rental units on Mill Street at a public meeting next week.

The Springfield-based non-profit, formerly known as HAPHousing, purchased the former farm at 586 Mill St., Feeding Hills, in 2016. Way Finders' plan calls for a mix of subsidized and market-priced rental units in 10 two-story buildings in the rear two-thirds of the property.

Don't expect it to be done overnight, however. Because of the time needed to secure permits and funding, the earliest it could be built is 2020, according to Faith Williams, Way Finders' senior vice president of property and asset management.

"It does take quite a long time to get from these sort of plans to having machines out there," she said this week.

HOUSING | page 4

Way Finders will share its preliminary plans, including a site plan and architects' renderings of how the buildings would look, from 6 to 8 p.m. Thursday, March 22, at Agawam High School, 760 Cooper St. All are invited to attend, particularly residents of the neighborhood.

Carolyn Shiel, a project manager at Way Finders, said the Mill Street development would be similar to Parsons Village, a Way Finders property completed in September 2016 on Parsons Street in Easthampton.

About 25 percent of the property, or 15 units, would be priced at market rates, Shiel said, with 75 percent subsidized to some degree as "affordable housing." Most of those units would be priced for the budgets of people earning 60 percent of the Springfield-area median income, as determined by the U.S. Census Bureau. That 60 percent figure is currently \$33,600, or roughly \$16 an hour, for a single person living alone, or \$48,000 for a household with four people. These would correspond to rents of about \$900 a month for a one-bedroom unit, and \$1,248

per month for a three-bedroom apartment.

A smaller number of units, perhaps eight to 10, would receive additional subsidies to accommodate people earning less than 60 percent of the region's median income. Apartments designated for all income levels will be built the same way and interspersed among each other.

"The ideal healthy community has a mix" of income levels, Shiel said. "A lot of these people, the residents, are making a living wage or better."

Residents would be chosen via a lottery system. Williams said the town could ask the state Department of Housing and Community Development to allow Way Finders to include a local preference into the lottery. At Parsons Village, she said, 70 percent of the units were reserved for people who already lived, worked or sent their children to school in Easthampton. Local applicants who were not selected in the local-preference lottery were also entered into the general lottery for the remaining units. Shiel said Way Finders has included a local preference in its resident lottery for every new-construction project it has built since 2010.

Design and security

Under the tentative plan, 21 of the 62 units would have one bedroom, 29 would have two bedrooms and 13 would have three bedrooms. Some of the one-bedroom units on ground floors would be built with senior and handicap accessibility in mind. All units with ground-floor access would have handicap "visitability" features, such as wider doors and bathrooms on the first floor.

The plan also features about 100 parking spaces, a basketball half-court, a playground and a community center, including a common function room and a coin-operated laundry.

Based on their experience with previous projects like this one, Way Finders estimates the project would add 44 school-age children to Agawam's population. Shiel said they also commissioned a traffic study, and found the effect on Mill Street would be "minimal." The driveway will end with a stop sign at Mill Street, with no changes to the main road itself.

Williams said Way Finders has a strict screening process for tenants, incorporating criminal records, credit checks,



income verification and follow-ups with their past five years of landlords. After the agency renovated an apartment house in Northampton, police commended them for drastically reducing calls to the property, Williams said. The Mill Street property would include security cameras operating 24 hours a day, and local police would have access to a live feed.

Chapter 40B

A project of this density would not ordinarily be allowed in an agricultural zone. Because the property contains subsidized "affordable housing," Way Finders can apply to the Department of Housing and Community Development for a "comprehensive permit" under Chapter 40B of state law. This would allow it to sidestep local zoning requirements and most local oversight. Way Finders would still have to appear before the Zoning Board of Appeals, but the board would have considerably less authority to deny the project than it or the Planning Board would have ordinarily.

The purpose of the law is to encourage subsidized housing construction in towns with zoning regulations that make such projects uneconomical. Towns are exempt from Chapter 40B if 10 percent of their housing inventory qualifies as subsidized affordable housing; Agawam has only 4 percent.

Following the March 22 meeting, Way Finders plans to make its comprehensive permit application to the state in April. If DHCD allows the permit to go forward, Way Finders would begin discussing the project with town boards, such as the ZBA and Conservation Commission, which Shiel estimated would be a three- to six-month process.

Once the permits are in place, Way Finders would apply to the state for funding. The soonest it could be awarded would be in 2019, but Shiel said projects often have to apply in more than one annual grant cycle.

"The construction period is still likely

several years away," Shiel said.

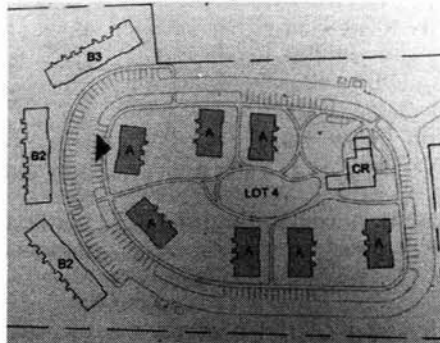
Vacant lots

All of the currently planned development would take place on an 8.85-acre parcel in the back of the property, with a driveway extending to Mill Street. Most of the land nearest to the street would be left vacant and would not be included in the 40B application.

Earlier this month, Way Finders received Planning Board approval to subdivide its property into four parcels, with two square lots of 0.35 and 0.38 acres within the RA2 residential zone along Mill Street and an L-shaped 2.7-acre lot partially in the agricultural zone beside and behind the smaller lots.

Marc Strange, the town's director of planning and economic development, said all three of the proposed empty lots have sufficient acreage and road frontage to accommodate a single-family home under Agawam's zoning code.

Shiel said Way Finders has no plans yet for the vacant lots, and does not envision making plans for those lots until the larger project is underway. She confirmed that one option would be for the agency to sell them to private developers as house lots.



Way Finders has subdivided its Mill Street property into four lots, and is planning 62 rental units in 10 townhouse buildings. WAY FINDERS IMAGES

