LOCAL PRESS

News (/News/)

Agencies vie for Block Grant funds

By SCOTT MERZBACH
Staff Writer

Thursday, January 03, 2019

AMHERST — Building two multi-use paths in South Amherst, renovations to existing affordable housing and construction of new apartments, and various programs that serve low- and moderate-income residents, are among projects seeking Community Development Block Grant money.

Amherst will be getting $825,000 from the program as one of 11 mini-entitlement communities designated by the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development due to its "high statistical indication of need, poverty rate and size."

The CDBG Advisory Committee will meet Jan. 10 to begin reviewing the applications, and a public hearing will be held Jan. 24, said Senior Planner Nathaniel Malloy.

By the noon Friday deadline, $886,628 in non-social service projects were submitted, though just $536,250 is available, based on 65 percent of the total CDBG funding available. Eight social service agencies are seeking $350,000, but this portion of the CDBG funding is capped at $165,000, or 20 percent of the $825,000. Administrative overhead will use 15 percent of the grant.

The biggest request for non-social services is $250,000 for the town to complete the third phase of the East Hadley Road multi-use path, which is already under construction. This 8- to 10-foot wide path will be a safer way for pedestrians to get from the apartment complexes, such as The Boulders and Southpoint Apartments, to West Street/ Route 116.

Another $225,000 is being sought by the town for a multi-use path that would enhance an existing sidewalk and unpaved walkways on Mill Lane. The aim of this is to encourage people to walk and bike to Groff Park, the recreational area that will be getting the town's first spray park in 2019.

The Amherst Housing Authority is asking for $211,628 to install new siding on Watson Farms at 693 Main St. This siding will help prevent deterioration of the housing stock.

Finally, Valley Community Development Corp. is asking for $200,000 for the predevelopment of 28 units of affordable, small studio apartments planned for a site on Northampton Road. These enhanced single-room occupancy units would be the first of their kind in Amherst and be used for individuals at risk of becoming homeless.

Valley CDC has previously developed and owned four SRO projects totaling 53 units in Northampton and Florence.

The eight social service agencies seeking money range from the $25,000 request by the Center for New Americans, to assist with making immigrants economically self sufficient and providing them support services, to the $60,000 request by Craig's Doors: A Home Association to provide case management at the Craig's Place shelter and resource center.

Others asking for funding include the Amherst Survival Center for its food pantry and Kids Boost program, The Literacy Project for its adult literacy and job readiness skills program, Amherst Community Connections for its resource center for low-income individuals, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Hampshire County for youth mentoring, Family Outreach of Amherst for support of families and the Amherst Boys & Girls Club for youth programming.

Scott Merzbach can be reached at smerzbach@gazettenet.com.

DAILY HAMPSHIRE
GAZETTE
(https://www.gazettenet.com)

Residents air concerns about low-income housing project in Amherst

The house at 132 Northampton Road, Amherst, seen from the Amherst College campus. GOOGLE MAPS

By SCOTT MERZBACH (/byline?byline=By SCOTT MERZBACH)
Staff Writer
Published: 5/21/2019 9:16:36 AM

Related stories

Valley CDC moving ahead with housing in Amherst for extremely low-income (https://www.gazettenet.com/Valley-CDC-moving-forward-with-plans-for-single-room-occupancy-project-in-Amherst-22816897)

AMHERST — A proposed 28-room building that would house extremely low-income individuals, including some transitioning from homelessness, is beginning to raise concerns from some nearby residents about whether the size and scope of the project are right for the neighborhood.

At a Community Resources Committee meeting of the Town Council earlier this month, several residents advised councilors to be cautious about appropriating money to assist in converting a single-family home at 132 Northampton Road into what is known as a single-room occupancy, or SRO, project.

"This is a concerning development," said Steve George, of 23 Dana St.

George said that the project would be more suitable if it were housing a smaller number of tenants. Having 28 residents on a small parcel with limited open space will likely have impacts on neighboring homes, George said.

Valley CDC is depending on the town appropriating money from the Community Preservation Act account, which will be determined by the Town Council as part of the budget process.

The CPA Committee is recommending that the town borrow $500,000 to support the project, in which each unit will be about 240 square feet and have a kitchenette and bathroom, with the building also including common areas and a provider office.

Valley CDC would be responsible for coordinating ongoing on-site services to the residents, as well as community-based services for the individuals.

The agency will also seek money from the state Housing Innovations Fund and Affordable Housing Trust Fund, both for $1 million, and then a comprehensive permit under the state's chapter 40B law, which will require a Zoning Board of Appeals special permit hearing.

If all goes according to plan, the construction would begin in April 2021, with occupancy to start in May 2022 and full occupancy to be achieved in July 2022.

John Hornik, chairman of the Amherst Municipal Affordable Housing Trust, said even though Valley CDC is requesting town spending, the appropriateness of the project should not be a matter before councilors, but rather the ZBA when the project comes for review.

Hornik said there is an "overblown fear" of the people who would live at the SRO building, and that if the town backs away from its support, there would be no other places where similar development would be acceptable.

Kate Troast, of 99 Dana St., said such redevelopment of a property should fit into the neighborhood, but having 28 new beds may be too many.

"To me, the size of the structure will be out of scale with its surroundings," Troast said.

Tim Atteridge, of 143 Northampton Road, whose home is adjacent to the property, said told councilors he is not sure the project fits with the town's master plan, which encourages such developments to maintain the character of the street.

"I can't see how it's going to enhance the character of our neighborhood," Atteridge said.

Valley CDC brings extensive experience with similar projects, owning and operating four sites with 53 studio apartments in Northampton and Florence. It has also worked in Amherst to create 11 family rental units at 683-687 Main St., completed in 2008, and eight homes on Charles Lane, sold to homeowners in 1996.

Councilors will have to make a decision, as with all spending and fiscal year 2020 budget matters, prior to July 1.

In District 4, Counselor Stephen Schreiber said he and Counselor Evan Ross earlier this week held a district meeting at which they heard both concerns and support for the project. Some of the concerns, he said, included the number of units, the hours of on-site management, the mix of prospective tenants, the distance from bus stops, and the proximity to the college's playing fields. The support for the project included integrating affordable housing into established neighborhoods, particularly if the housing is for families and will serve both men and women.

Scott Merzbach can be reached at smerzbach@gazettenet.com.

amherst ma (/keyword/?keyword=amherst ma) land use (/keyword/?keyword=land use)

Share on Facebook

(https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?s=100&u=https%3a%2f%2fwww.gazettenet.com%2fResidents-bring-concerns-forward-about-single-room-occupancy-project-in-Amherst-25620985)

Share on Twitter

(https://twitter.com/share?url=https://www.gazettenet.com/Residents-bring-concerns-forward-about-single-room-occupancy-project-in-Amherst-25620985&text=Residents air concerns about low-income housing project in Amherst)

Share via E-Mail

(mailto:?&subject=Residents air concerns about low-income housing project in Amherst&body=Read%20this%20article%20from%20the%20Daily%20Hampshire%20Gazette%3A%20%20https://www.gazettenet.com/Residents-bring-concerns-forward-about-single-room-occupancy-project-in-Amherst-25620985)

Sponsored Content

Ads by Revcontent

By SCOTT MERZBACH (/byline?byline=By SCOTT MERZBACH)
Staff Writer
Published: 4/24/2019 2:26:19 PM

AMHERST — Projects including the acquisition of three properties to protect wildlife habitats, the creation of affordable housing and improvements to municipal recreation areas are being recommended for funding by the Community Preservation Act Committee.

The committee recently completed its review of numerous proposals and is advising the Town Council to support $1.38 million in new projects. It is also authorizing the borrowing of an additional $500,000 to assist Valley Community Development Corp. with a studio apartment project on Northampton Road — a single-room occupancy project where residents will receive case management and supportive services.

The CPA spending is part of the new budget process that will include Town Manager Paul Bockelman unveiling his budget plan for fiscal year 2020 on May 1.

Among the spending is a total of $626,000 that will be used to acquire land at the former Hickory Ridge Golf Club on West Pomeroy Lane and two other sites, the Szala property in North Amherst and the Keet Haskins property in the Cushman section of town.

The idea behind purchasing a portion of the 150-acre site that has been a golf course is to protect the Fort River. Up to 25 acres of the golf course are planned for a solar array.

The Szala site spans 25 acres between the existing Podick and Katherine Cole conservation areas and would protect a wildlife habitat, as well as create new trail connections.

Hadley Town Meeting next week is being presented an article that would use $210,000 in CPA money to protect a contiguous parcel through the Agricultural Preservation Restriction program.

Keet Haskins spans 49 acres between East Leverett and Market Hill roads and would protect the Cushman Brook.

In addition to providing financial assistance to Valley CDC, $200,000 will go to the Amherst Municipal Affordable Housing Trust for development and consulting support, needed as it moves forward with the project to convert the East Street School into apartments, and an additional $40,000 for consulting support. Another $116,280 will be used by Amherst Community Connections for a rental subsidy program to keep people in homes.

For recreation, $220,000, with half to be borrowed, will go toward the Groff Park modernization underway, which includes the town's first spray park, as well as a new playground and pavilion.

Mill River Recreation Area will get $25,000 for improving basketball courts, a playground and a pavilion.

DAILY HAMPSHIRE
GAZETTE
(https://www.gazettenet.com)

News > Local (/News/Local/)

Valley CDC moving ahead with housing in Amherst for extremely low-income

Amherst Town Hall

By SCOTT MERZBACH (/byline?byline=By SCOTT MERZBACH) Published: 1/16/2019 3:20:47 PM

Staff Writer

AMHERST — Amherst's large college student population and limited housing supply has created a challenge in finding a suitable site for studio apartments for extremely low-income individuals, including some who are homeless.

But this week, after a more than two-year process, Valley Community Development Corp. of Northampton will purchase a home and nearly 1-acre site on Northampton Road that could become Amherst's first single-room occupancy project, where residents will receive case management and supportive services.

Laura Baker, real estate manager for Valley CDC, said Wednesday the acquisition of the property, which is near Amherst College's athletic fields, is the culmination of what she calls an "exhaustive" search, but just the beginning of a project estimated to cost close to $5 million.

"Securing a site is a major milestone," Baker said. "We have identified a property in a great location, about halfway between downtown and University Drive."

The property, which could accommodate up to 28, 240-square foot "SRO" units, each with its own kitchenette and bathroom, is within walking and biking distance of shops, like Big Y Supermarket and CVS Pharmacy on University Drive, and the office of Amherst Community Connections, the John P. Musante Community Health Center and the resource center operated by Craig's Doors, Inc., which also runs the town's seasonal homeless shelter.

Baker said the funding and permitting to create the project will still take time, with opening still likely two to three years away. Valley CDC will seek money from the state Housing Innovations Fund and Affordable Housing Trust Fund, both for $1 million, and then a comprehensive permit under the state's chapter 40B law, which will require a Zoning Board of Appeals special permit hearing.

Valley CDC has already submitted to the town's Community Preservation Act Committee for $500,000, and Amherst's Community Development Block Grant

Committee for $200,000.

John Hornik, chairman of the Amherst Municipal Affordable Housing Trust, said the project has the strong support of his committee. At a recent meeting, members of the trust ranked creating these SRO units as the highest priority for CPA funds.

Valley CDC brings extensive experience with similar projects, owning and operating four sites with 53 studio apartments in Northampton and Florence. It has also worked in Amherst to create 11 family rental units at 683-687 Main St., completed in 2008, and eight homes on Charles Lane, sold to homeowners in 1996.

"There's nothing quite like this in Amherst," Baker said about the project, adding that it has been the missing link in the housing stock in town. Affordable family housing has been more common, including projects such as Olympia Oaks and Butternut Farm, and portions of the under construction North Square at the Mill District.

The individuals housed at the SRO will have some diversity of income and backgrounds, Baker said, with some coming from homelessness to others who are senior citizens and disabled. If serving 28 adults, the current plans shows that 10 units would be reserved for homeless people earning 30 percent of area median income, or $16,950, two units would be for clients of the Department of Mental Health, also earning at or less than $16,950, and eight units would be for those making 50 percent of area median income, or $28,250 and eight units for those making 80 percent of area median income, or $45,200.

Baker said the project is not designed for undergraduate students and funding rules from state programs would prohibit their living on site.

The stage was set for allowing such a project when Amherst Town Meeting in May 2017 amended the town's zoning bylaw to allow all apartments in a project where people make under 80 percent of the area median income to be of one bedroom type. Zoning otherwise requires a mix of styles of apartments.

Baker said Valley CDC has already done site analysis for what would fit on the site, but still has more study to do. The existing home could be renovated into four units and a possible two to three-story addition would create the remainder of units.

Work is also underway to get memorandums of agreements with social service providers so when it opens, a residential services coordinator will be on site.

Scott Merzbach can be reached at smerzbach@gazettenet.com.

Facebook

Valley Community Development

Joanne Home Create

Page Inbox Events Manage Jobs **Notifications** Insights More Settings Help

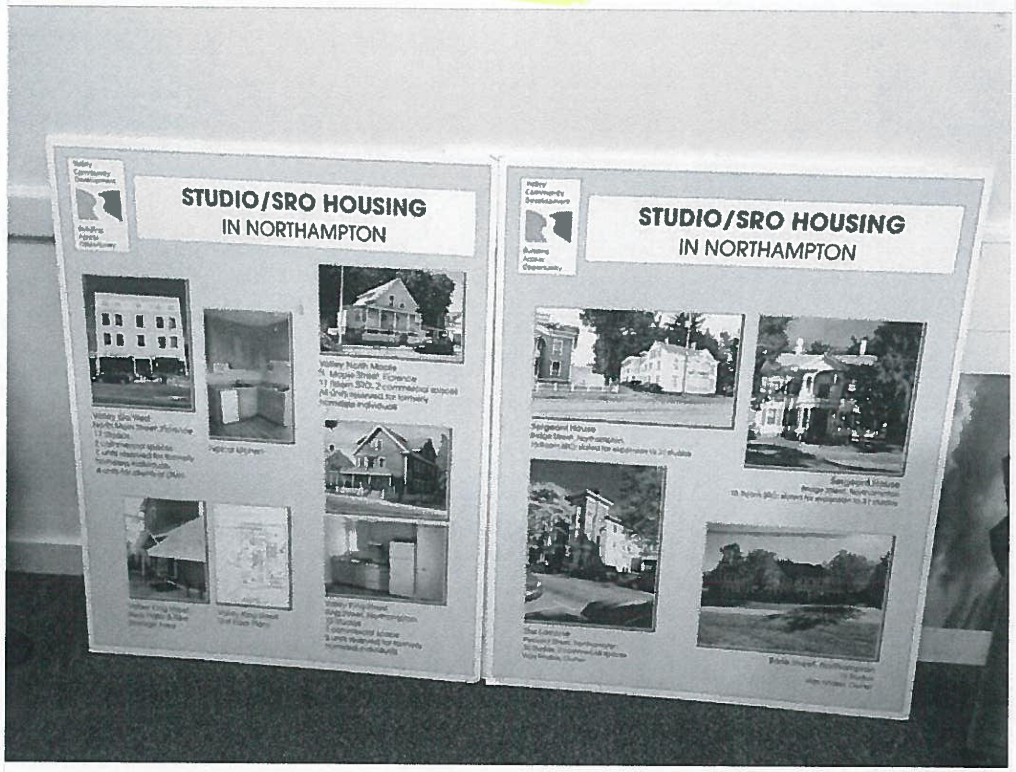
Recent Mentions | **Activity** | Reviews and Recommendations

Mention

Evan Ross, Amherst Town Council - District 4
3 hrs

Liked as Your Page

Councilor DeAngelis and I crossed the bridge to Northampton today to meet with Valley Community Development to learn more about their proposed Single Room Occupancy project in Amherst and tour one of their completed projects in Northampton. It was a great opportunity to hear about their property management and their plans for the Amherst site.



Valley Community Development 1 Comment 1 Share

Like **Comment** **Share**

Write a comment...

Most Relevant

Valley Community Development Thanks to you and Pat for coming to learn more about the safe secure housing we provide to our most vulnerable community members.

Like · Reply · Commented on by Joanne Campbell · 2m

Mention

Amherst Affordable Housing Advocacy Coalition shared a post.
March 26 at 11:20 AM

CPAC Meeting on Thursday! A few affordable housing initiatives have applied including Valley Community Development's Northampton Road project and several proposals from the Amherst Municipal Affordable Housing Trust (AMAHT). Be there to learn and to be an advocate for affordable housing in Amherst!

Chat (15)

Daily Hampshire Gazette

Julia Home

Liked Following Share ...

Daily Hampshire Gazette

@DailyHampshireGazette

Home

Posts

About

Videos

Events

Community

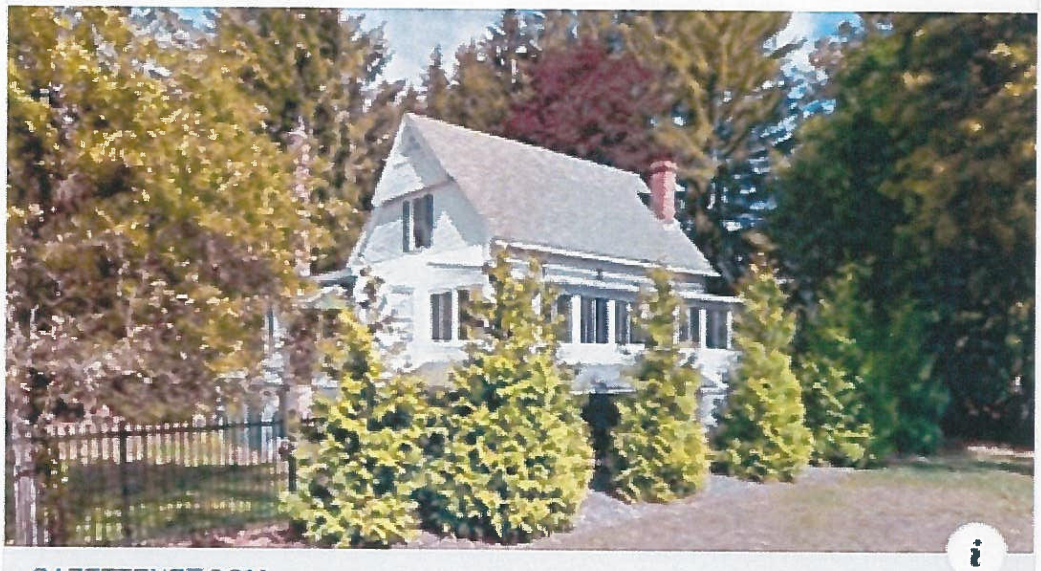
Photos

Create a Page

Daily Hampshire Gazette

50 mins ·

A proposed 28-room building that would house extremely low-income individuals in Amherst, Massachusetts is beginning to raise concerns from some nearby residents about whether the size and scope of the project are right for the neighborhood.



GAZETTENET.COM

Residents air concerns about low-income housing project in Amherst

11 14 comments 3 shares

Like Comment Share

All comments

Write a comment...

Emilie Hamilton the housing project is not really in a neighborhood. which is why this site was chosen. those choosing to complain would probably complain about any low income housing project built in Amherst.

Like · Reply · 37m 11

John Page It is a good location. Close to downtown, walkable, transit systems, and the state is redoing the sidewalks very soon on Northampton Road. I would encourage you to email the Amherst Town Council (towncouncil@amherstma.gov) and let them know you support moving forward with the project! They need to

Daily Hampshire Gazette

Julia Hom

Daily Hampshire Gazette
@DailyHampshireGazette

Home
Posts
About
Videos
Events
Community
Photos

Create a Page

Liked · Following · Share ···

reconsider. The surrounding area of their current choice has had mostly single family residents paying hightly for their homes and for town taxes, water and sewer and insurance for long periords. The town does not show care and respect to those homeowenrs with this plan and location. Charlotte Dwyer, Retired Real Esate Broker, formerly of Amerhst.

Like · Reply · 9m

Sandra J Giusto Really?? But yet they want to be a sanctuary city to house illegal immigrants- but not the homeless town residents??

Like · Reply · 23m · 1

Steve Bass NIMBY!! 1

Like · Reply · 42m

Mark Cote Evan Ross

Like · Reply · 30m

Jules Lord I must wonder if they would complain if it was going to be expensive student housing. Is the REAL issue that it's low income & these residents are a bunch of holier than thou people who just love to discriminate?? Or is it a real concern because of legitimate things like traffic issues, ground drainage (flooding) etc.

I'm putting my money on the former! ... See more

Like · Reply · 32m · 4

Patrick Boughan Jules Lord i agree it's the former. there's no traffic problem. It's on a main road, near transit and amentities. Also, low income residents are less likely to own a car at all, so super green!

Like · Reply · 22m · Edited · 2

Write a reply...

Jayne Treesyster Rubenstein Great idea

Like · Reply · 34m

Steve William Lindsey Should lower caste people be housed in Holyoke?

Like · Reply · 12m

Write a comment...

Daily Hampshire Gazette

Julia Ho

Daily Hampshire Gazette
@DailyHampshireGazette

Home
Posts
About
Videos
Events
Community
Photos

Create a Page

Liked · Following · Share ···

Write a reply...

John Page If you are interested in learning more about affordable housing in Amherst and/or want to get more involved in this important issue including advocating for projects like these. Like/follow the Amherst Affordable Housing Advocacy Coalition. We have a meeting tonight, Tuesday 5/21 at 7PM in the Lower Meeting Room of the Bangs Community Center!

Like · Reply · 12m

Diane E. Mercomes NIMBY nonsense.

Like · Reply · 35m · 4

Mark Cote I would say that they didn't just pick the number randomly, it was chosen as part of their research into the issues with poverty in the area. If opponents just want to keep away poor people, denying them housing options isn't going to work. It's either... See more

Like · Reply · 26m · 2

Max Rapoport Simple nimby bs

Like · Reply · 43m · 3

Charlotte Dwyer I believe this is a poorly considered plan of development for this location. Amherst has many other more appropriate locations for their plan that will still be conventient for residents of one room rentals. This town needs to reconsider. The surrounding area of their current choice has had mostly single family residents paying hightly for their homes and for town taxes, water and sewer and insurance for long periords. The town does not show care and respect to those homeowenrs with this plan and location. Charlotte Dwyer, Retired Real Esate Broker, formerly of Amerhst.

Like · Reply · 9m

Sandra J Giusto Really?? But yet they want to be a sanctuary city to house illegal immigrants- but not the homeless town residents??

Like · Reply · 23m · 1

Steve Bass NIMBY!! · 1

Like · Reply · 42m

Mark Cote Evan Ross

Like · Reply · 30m

AMHERST

Residents: Don't rush low-income project

By SCOTT MERZBACH
Staff Writer

AMHERST — Almost 50 residents who live near the Route 9 site of a proposed building that would provide apartments to 28 low-income individuals are urging the Town Council to vote against authorizing any municipal spending on the project until a series of concerns are addressed.

A letter sent to the 13 councilors Tuesday from 48 people living in District 3 and 4 requests that the Finance Committee temporarily put off a recommendation to borrow $500,000 from the Community Preservation Act account to support the Valley Community Development Corp.'s single-room occupancy, or SRO, project at 132 Northampton Road.

"We are not saying 'not in our backyard,'" the residents write. "We are saying 'please get this right, because it's our backyard.'"

The letter states that future tenants of the project deserve a housing plan "with sufficient support for them to successfully integrate into the neighborhood."

Kate Troast of 99 Dana St. said Tuesday that the residents who live near the project site, on the south side of Northampton Road adjacent to Amherst College's Pratt Field, are asking for significantly more dialogue.

"We don't feel there's enough details worked out about this project," Troast said.

The CPA Committee, though, is recommending the project, which has also been endorsed by the Amherst Municipal Affordable Housing Trust.

Tuesday afternoon, the Finance Committee agreed to delay its vote on the borrowing until June 25, which will follow a facilitated community discussion on the project June 18 at 6 p.m. at the Bangs Community Center. The Town Council will then vote on the borrowing either July 1 or July 18.

Since learning about the building in April, Troast said the focus for those who live nearby has been getting more data about how similar projects, which feature apartments with beds, bathrooms and kitchenettes, work in other communities.

This data indicates that the proposal will not effectively serve the residents of the SRO and will negatively impact the surrounding community, especially since there will only be supervision of the site during the day, rather than having around the clock, on-site management.

As part of the research, the residents collected data about police calls to five similar sites managed by Valley CDC in Northampton and presented the data with their letter of the Town Council.

The project previously won approval from Town Meeting, which had to change municipal zoning to accommodate such a project that features units all the same size, rather than a mix of one-, two- three-

SEE LOW-INCOME B4

Low-income project criticized

FROM B1

and four-bedroom units.

Among suggestions the neighbors have is making the development smaller with more funding for staff, increasing funding for organizations like Amherst Community Connections, which provides immediate relief for homelessness through rental subsidies, renovation of existing properties elswehere in town, or family-oriented affordable housing at this location.

The letter states that access to Pratt Field may be shut off by the college if any problems develop.

"A few of us are Amherst College professors and we contacted college officials to determine what might happen if there are problematic incidents between the SRO and Amherst College students. The college responded that they would shut down the athletic fields to public access."

A college spokesperson told the Gazette that the college will not be making any public comment regarding the project.

John Hornik, chairman of the housing trust, has responded to concerns that the project should be allowed to proceed past the funding stage to the permitting stage. At that point, Valley CDC will have to obtain a comprehensive permit through the Zoning Board of Appeals. Issues such as impacts on traffic and necessary screening will be addressed at that time.

Town Manager Paul Bockelman said a delay in the Finance Committee process is not a problem, as the borrowing can be done outside the normal budget season. Bockelman's fiscal year 2020 budget proposal, as well as the capital plan and budgets for library and schools, must be complete by July 1.

"Because it's borrowing, they don't have to make the decision by June 30," Bockelman said.

Scott Merzbach can be reached at smerzbach@gazettenet.com.

NO OPPONENTS
SPOKE per John H.

AMHERST

Finance Committee endorses $68.2M budget

By SCOTT MERZBACH
Staff Writer

AMHERST — A $68.2 million budget that will cover the costs of operating the town, the elementary schools and the town's share of the library system beginning July 1 has been endorsed by the Finance Committee.

The panel on Tuesday voted 4-0 to recommend the full Town Council approve the budget, which includes $24.58 million in spending on municipal services, $23.84 million for the Amherst elementary schools and $2.04 million in tax support for the Jones Library, as well as $6.4 million for retirement and other post-employment benefits and other obligations, and $4.7 million for other assessments.

Amherst Town Council previously approved $16.44 million for the Amherst-Pelham Regional Schools, taking up that spending to align Amherst with when the district's other towns, Pelham, Shutesbury and Leverett, held their annual Town Meetings in late April and early May.

At Large Councilor Andy Steinberg, who chairs the Finance Committee, said the town's finances are in good shape and the budgets feature no proposed reductions or even dilutions of existing programs.

There is also no need to seek a Proposition 2½ tax-cap override to meet the budget, though Steinberg observes that is because the town has had sufficient development to provide new tax revenue.

District 3 Councilor Dorothy Pam said she would like to get more information about how well-financed the town is and whether budgets will continue to depend on future commercial and residential development.

"I don't find that a great situation," Pam said.

Pam added that she is particularly concerned that taxes from new growth depends on projects being developed on the east side of Kendrick Park in downtown Amherst, where One East Pleasant and Kendrick Place mixed-use buildings have gone up.

A Historical Commission hearing next week could determine if three more buildings in that area will be demolished, including the Pub restaurant, which may show that more development is coming to that part of town. Pam suggested the Town Council may need to give better direction for project developments.

"I just have a sense of not enough order right now," Pam said.

Pam said her other concern is spending on so many building projects at once, including an elementary school, a fire station for South Amherst, a new Department of Public Works headquarters and an expanded and renovated Jones Library.

Council President Lynn Griesemer said she anticipates the council will have a discussion about how to find ways to diversify the tax base so that the tax burden doesn't continually fall on homeowners.

In addition to the budgets, the Finance Committee recommended $2.54 million for capital needs in fiscal year 2020, such as building improvements and vehicle purchases, and $839,040 in projects supported by the Community Preservation Act account. Those CPA projects include $200,000 to protect a portion of Hickory Ridge Golf Course from development, $110,000 to modernize Groff Park and $50,000 for headstone repairs at West Cemetery.

Two additional CPA projects being supported include $188,000 to preserve the Szala property, 25 acres between the existing Podick and Katherine Cole conservation area in North Amherst near the Hadley town line, and $638,000 for the Keet Haskins property, 49 acres between East Leverett and Market Hill roads that would protect the Cushman Brook and the town's water supply.

Besides putting off a recommendation on $500,000 in borrowing to support an enhanced single-room occupancy project proposed by Valley Community Development Corp., the Finance Committee is also waiting to make recommendations on a series of borrowing articles to pay for designs of the new DPW and fire station, and other projects, until those projects are closer to proceeding.

Scott Merzbach can be reached at smerzbach@gazettenet.com.

Commentary (/Commentary/)

Nicola Usher: Opposing SRO project means opposing affordable housing

Friday, June 07, 2019

Amherst has a rare opportunity to provide much needed affordable housing, and encourage an inclusive community with the Valley CDC Studio Apartment Supportive Housing project proposed for 132 Northampton Road.

As someone who grew up in affordable housing, it has been disheartening for me to hear some of the fears voiced by area residents, particularly the assumptions being made about the potential future tenants posing a threat to the safety of the community.

The only thing we know for sure about the potential tenants is that they are people who need an affordable place to live. That is all. In an area that boasts itself as liberal and progressive we need to do better. When someone says that this project "is not in character with the neighborhood," we're being complicit in stereotyping if we don't challenge them to elaborate on what that means. If someone opposes an affordable housing development near them, that person simply opposes affordable housing.

Where is the compassion and values of diversity and inclusion on which the Amherst community prides itself? Do we really just value diversity and inclusion in theory and from a distance, but not in our own backyards?

It saddens me that while some are expressing concerns about crime, traffic, and the impact on their property values, these future tenants, who are actively seeking community and support, would move in (if the project goes through) knowing they have neighbors who actively tried to discriminate against them.

I sincerely hope this project moves forward, and I hope many will join me in supporting it and welcoming new members to our community when they move in. During their campaigns, town councilors repeatedly spoke of representing voices not heard from. The dominant voices criticizing this proposal are those of homeowners in a concentrated area.

This is an opportunity for the councilors to represent the underrepresented. I appreciate that the council is challenged to serve diverse needs while balancing the concerns of residents, but concerns aren't valid just because they exist and leadership means standing up for what is right. There aren't two sides to social justice.

Nicola Usher

Amherst

6/11/19

DAILY HAMPSHIRE GAZETT
An independent newspaper since 1786

Michael Moses *Publisher* | **Brooke Hauser** *Editor in Chief* | **Chad Cain** *Opinion Editor* | **Dan Crow** *Managing E*

In support of CDC project in Amherst

I want to extend my support for the Valley CDC studio apartment supported housing project, which would be located on Northampton Road in Amherst.

I live in Florence and am very fortunate to be in a neighborhood that has a variety of low- and moderate-income housing, including another Valley CDC project similar to that proposed for Amherst.

There are many reasons why people are homeless or low-income, and there but for the grace of God go you and I. Welcome them and get to know them. Valley CDC is a well respected area leader in affordable housing. Please support this proposed project and your fellow human beings.

CARMEN JUNNO
Florence

CDC's track record should help allay fears of SRO project

Fear can be a useful force in our lives. It can lead us to safety; it can help us protect our children; it can cause us to take action.

6/13/19

It can also cause us to lose our way by convincing us to abandon our most cherished values in the name of safety. I'm reminded of this truth when I think about the controversy around the proposed mixed income studio apartment project on Route 9 near Amherst College.

How do we know when fear is tricking us into believing we are threatened? How do we discern real threat from fear itself? Valley Community Development Corporation has a long track record of safely providing such apartments in Northampton. I urge people to read their thorough response to all the concerns expressed by neighbors, posted on the Amherst town website. I believe these documents go a long way toward allaying many of the fears this project has engendered.

GERRY WEISS
Amherst

6/14/19

OPINION (http://www.amherstindy.org/category/opinion/)

WHO NEEDS IT? WHO ARE THE FUTURE RESIDENTS OF VALLEY CDC's PROPOSED AFFORDABLE HOUSING PROJECT ON NORTHAMPTON ROAD?

7 days ago Maurianne Adams (http://www.amherstindy.org/author/adams/)

Amherst residents and officials have for many years talked about our commitment to affordable housing. This commitment has been tested by high market-rate rentals that are unaffordable to many in our town and collegiate workforces, especially at the entry level. The need for mixed mid- and low-income affordable housing here led Valley Community Development Corporation (Valley CDC) to propose, and Amherst's Community Preservation Act Committee (CPAC) to recommend, a bond issue to leverage significant state funding for a 28-unit Studio Apartment project at 132 Northampton Road that is now before the town council. But faced with abutter and neighborhood opposition, the finance committee has delayed action on the bond question, pending an open meeting for town residents to be held by the council on June 24.

It is important to know that of the 28 affordable units (each with bathroom and kitchenette), 16 will serve workforce housing with income caps of $31,050 (50 percent of the area median income) and $49,700 (80 percent area median income). This workforce housing is likely to accommodate Amherst service workers, maintenance staff, teachers, aides, social workers. The town of Amherst's collective bargaining agreements document in detail the workforce-housing need based on the Amherst entry-level (2018) salaries for firefighters ($40–$47,000), Department of Public Works level 1 ($43,000–mid $50s), clerical salaries step 1 in our schools (2016: $23,294–mid $40s). Thus, 16 of the 28 Valley CDC apartments will be available to mid-income workforce who have been squeezed out of Amherst's high-end rental market. Ten of the studio apartments will have a homeless preference and an income cap of $18,650, and

might well serve those who have been rendered homeless for various reasons including the closing of the nearby Amherst Motel. Two units are reserved for people referred by the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health.

In its "Response to Neighbor's Concerns" (https://www.amherstma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/47733/Response-to-Neighbor-Concerns-and-FAQs?bidId=)Valley CDC notes: "A person working full-time at the current MA minimum wage earns $24,960 annually. The median per capita income in Amherst is $20,336; the median single person household income is $28,018; and the median rental household income (all size households) is $28,290.

The best source for Valley CDC's proposal is posted on the Town of Amherst website. (https://www.amherstma.gov/3489/Northampton-Road-Project) The website explains the format for the June 24 open meeting of the residents that was called to address concerns about the project. According to the town:

"The purpose of the meeting is for the Town Council to hear from the public on funding recommended by the Community Preservation Act Committee and also to hear general observations, questions, or comments on other elements of the proposed project."

Readers who plan to make comments at that meeting might want to look at the website. It offers documents prepared by the Town and prepared by Valley CDC as well as letters from members of the community and media coverage. Especially useful are the documents provided by Valley CDC that address concerns raised by abutters and neighbors who object to the project. (https://www.amherstma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/47733/Response-to-Neighbor-Concerns-and-FAQs?bidId=)

By funding the $500,000 Community Preservation Act bonding issue, Amherst can leverage $4,000,000 in state funding to meet a desperate mid- and low-income rental shortfall. The June 24 open meeting will be a valuable opportunity to hear the facts of the proposal, engage with each other as neighbors, and support the bond issue. It is important that town residents be knowledgeable about what Valley CDC has proposed and CPAC has recommended. The documents assembled on the town website help to provide that clarity. There will be ample opportunity for the Zoning Board of Appeals, in the months ahead, to discuss details of the plan.

Tags: community preservation act (http://www.amherstindy.org/tag/community-preservation-act/), housing (http://www.amherstindy.org/tag/housing/)

OPINION

Michael Mc
Publisher

EDITORIAL 6/14/19

Advance SRO project in Amherst

When someone says, "I mean no disrespect, but ..." we pretty much know that something disrespectful is coming.

The same idea holds true for nimbyism. The most recent example of "not in my backyard" is coming from a group of Amherst residents who want to slow down the approval process for a much-needed affordable housing project at 132 Northampton Road, near Route 9.

"We are not saying 'not in our backyard...'" about 50 residents wrote in a letter to the Town Council urging the council's Finance Committee to temporarily put off a recommendation to borrow $500,000 from the Community Preservation Act account to support the single-room occupancy project.

But that's exactly what these residents are saying. They don't want this project in their backyard, but instead of saying that, they use health and safety concerns for both the tenants and residents who live nearby, primarily centered around "a large number of single people, mostly men, with a history of SUDs (substance-use disorders) and mental health problems in one building," according to a seven-page letter outlining their concerns.

The letter also outlines traffic-related concerns — a common NIMBY argument — and lists other worries related to the welfare and safety of tenants because of the site's location, and whether Amherst College will continue to allow the public to use the nearby Pratt/Gooding Field complex.

Neighbors call for Valley CDC to cut the project in half, particularly for tenants with a history of substance use and mental health disorders; provide live-in, 24-hour management; tailor the units toward families instead of single people; and consider placing it in a commercial or more urban district.

The upshot of these requests is essentially that the neighbors support public housing, but just not next to them.

While it's true the single-room occupancy project being proposed by Valley Community Development Corporation will mean new neighbors for these residents, it's a leap to think this project will bring crime, violence and undesirable behavior to a roughly 1-acre site within a half-mile of town center.

The proposed building would provide apartments for 28 low-income individuals — the majority of whom will be employed and earn moderate incomes. Here's the breakdown of who will live in the small studio apartments that average 240 square feet in size: 10 studios will have a homeless preference and an income cap of $18,650 a year; eight units will be rented to people with an income cap of $31,050; another eight will go to people with an income cap of $49,700; and two units will be for tenants from the Department of Mental Health with an income cap at $18,650.

Like similar projects in other communities, Valley CDC doesn't take anyone who walks through the door. Tenants are screened and must meet certain criteria. In a response to neighborhood concerns, Valley CDC argues that neighbors are relying on profiling by "ascribing characteristics to individuals because they belong to a group," such as low income, homeless, and having a mental health disability.

We agree. One major flaw in the neighbors' research is they don't give Valley CDC credit for its track record in the communities it serves — Amherst, Northampton, Easthampton and Hadley. The agency has developed 224 units of affordable housing, including 53 SRO and enhanced SRO units.

The nonprofit says it has operated similar housing for three decades without any incident of violence to neighbors. Two of these properties are in Northampton, next to the Bridge Street Elementary School playground and the Smith College athletic area.

The organization is arguably the biggest producer of affordable housing that helps vulnerable people secure shelter. Not only is the nonprofit the type of developer that Amherst should partner with, this project checks the boxes on many of the town's identified housing needs. We can't see the benefit in delaying a funding vote.

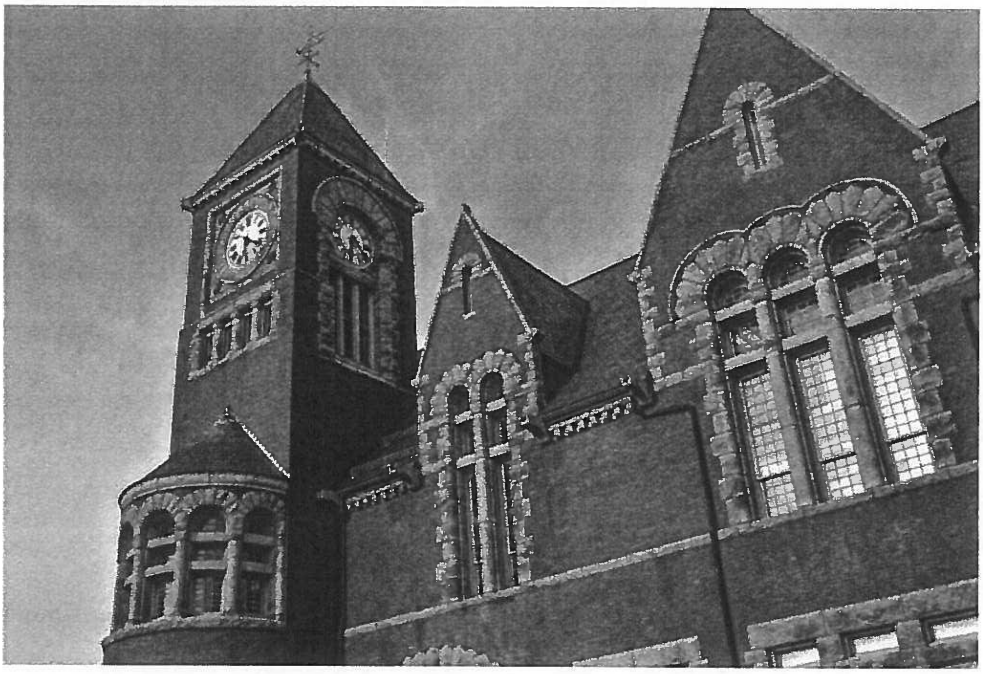
Amherst currently has zero affordable studio apartments with support services in town. This critical piece of the housing puzzle would meet a top goal of the town's community development strategy, which was last updated in 2018 and posted on the town's website.

The Northampton Road site is an ideal spot, located close to Pioneer Valley Transit Authority bus stop and within walking distance to a populated downtown area where residents can shop and visit many of the types of support services that will come with living in the SRO building.

The town should advance Valley CDC's CPA request this summer, following a community discussion scheduled for June 24. Many concerns can be addressed and discussed through the permitting process in the coming months, but this project fills a major need in Amherst and should move ahead.

DAILY HAMPSHIRE
GAZETTE
(https://www.gazettenet.com)

Residents' meeting called on Amherst affordable apartments proposal



Amherst Town Hall —STAFF PHOTO/JERREY ROBERTS » Buy this Image

By SCOTT MERZBACH (/byline?byline=By SCOTT MERZBACH)
Staff Writer
Published: 6/15/2019 4:00:14 PM

AMHERST — A proposal to build 28 affordable studio apartments to help meet some of the demand in Amherst for housing for low- and moderate-income people has sparked the first Open Meeting of the Residents, a dedicated evening of discussion that will be held this month. The proposal has raised worry that its setting near residential neighborhoods may not be an appropriate location, and the meeting will give people an opportunity to talk about the $5 million project being developed by Valley Community Development Corp. at 132 Northampton Road, adjacent to Amherst College's Pratt Field.

The meeting will be June 24 at 6:30 p.m. at the Bangs Community Center.

An Open Meeting of the Residents is a section of the town charter that allows a petition by at least 200 residents 18 and over, or members of the Town Council, School Committee or trustees for the Jones Library, to call a meeting focused on a single topic.

In this case, Council President Lynn Griesemer said the meeting is being called by the council to get feedback on the project. The meeting comes in advance of a decision by the council on whether to appropriate $500,000 from the Community Preservation Act account to help get the project built.

The proposed apartments are sometimes referred to as enhanced single-room occupancy, or SRO, with each apartment having a kitchenette and bathroom. Amherst has no similar properties, though several have been built opened in Northampton.

Of the 28 units, which will be inside an existing residence that will be expanded, 10 studios will have a homeless preference and an income cap of $18,650 a year. Another eight units will be rented to people with an income cap of $31,050, eight more will go to people with an income cap of $49,700, and two units will be for tenants from the Department of Mental Health with an income cap of $18,650.

The meeting will include brief presentations by the Community Preservation Act Committee, the Amherst Affordable Housing Trust, Valley CDC, abutters and neighbors.

The location is seen as ideal by advocates: within walking and biking distance of shops, including Big Y Supermarket and CVS Pharmacy on University Drive, and the office of Amherst Community Connections, the John P. Musante Community Health Center and the resource center operated by Craig's Doors Inc., which also runs the town's seasonal homeless shelter.

Others, though, have questioned whether there would be a need for more on-site management. Neighbors have requested extended dialogue so as much information is available as possible.

Comments can be submitted in writing in advance by sending them to towncouncil@amherstma.gov.

Action by the Town Council is likely at its July 1 meeting.

Scott Merzbach can be reached at smerzbach@gazettenet.com.

housing (/keyword/?keyword=housing) amherst ma (/keyword/?keyword=amherst ma) neighbors (/keyword/?keyword=neighbors) affordable housing (/keyword/?keyword=affordable housing) opposition (/keyword/?keyword=opposition) apartments (/keyword/?keyword=apartments) sro (/keyword/?keyword=sro)

Share on Facebook

(https://www.facebook.com/sharer/sharer.php?s=100&u=https%3a%2f%2fwww.gazettenet.com%2fMeeting-to-focus-on-Valley-CDC-project-in-Amherst-26289837)

Share on Twitter

(https://twitter.com/share?url=https://www.gazettenet.com/Meeting-to-focus-on-Valley-CDC-project-in-Amherst-26289837&text=Residents' meeting called on Amherst affordable apartments proposal)

Share via E-Mail

(mailto:?&subject=Residents' meeting called on Amherst affordable apartments proposal&body=Read%20this%20article%20from%20the%20Daily%20Hampshire%20Gazette%3A%20%20https://www.gazettenet.com/Meeting-to-focus-on-Valley-CDC-project-in-Amherst-26289837)

Sponsored Content

Ads by Revcontent

AMHERST

Apartments plan sparks residents' meeting

Council calls first-ever Open Meeting over objections to affordable housing proposal

By SCOTT MERZBACH
Staff Writer

AMHERST — A proposal to build 28 affordable studio apartments to help meet some of the demand in Amherst for housing for low- and moderate-income people has sparked the first Open Meeting of the Residents, a dedicated evening of discussion that will be held this month. The proposal has raised worry that its setting near residential neighborhoods may not be an appropriate location, and the meeting will give people an opportunity to talk about the $5 million project being developed by Valley Community Development Corp. at 132 Northampton Road, adjacent to Amherst College's Pratt Field.

The meeting will be June 24 at 6:30 p.m. at the Bangs Community Center.

An Open Meeting of the Residents is a section of the town charter that allows a petition by at least 200 residents 18 and over, or members of the Town Council, School Committee or trustees for the Jones Library, to call a meeting focused on a single topic.

In this case, Council President Lynn Griesemer said the meeting is being called by the council to get feedback on the project. The meeting comes in advance of a decision by the council on whether to appropriate $500,000 from the Community Preservation Act account to help get the project built.

The proposed apartments are sometimes referred to as enhanced single-room occupancy, or SRO, with each apartment having a kitchenette and bathroom. Amherst has no similar properties, though several have been built opened in Northampton.

Of the 28 units, which will be inside an existing residence that will be expanded, 10 studios will have a homeless preference and an income cap of $18,650 a year. Another eight units will be rented to people with an income cap of $31,050, eight more will go to people with an income cap of $49,700, and two units will be for tenants from the Department of Mental Health with an income cap of $18,650.

The meeting will include brief presentations by the Community Preservation Act Committee, the Amherst Affordable Housing Trust, Valley CDC, abutters and neighbors.

The location is seen as ideal by advocates: within walking and biking distance of shops, including Big Y Supermarket and CVS Pharmacy on University Drive, and the office of Amherst Community Connections, the John P. Musante Community Health Center and the resource center operated by Craig's Doors Inc., which also runs the town's seasonal homeless shelter.

Others, though, have questioned whether there would be a need for more on-site management. Neighbors have requested extended dialogue so as much information is available as possible.

Comments can be submitted in writing in advance by sending them to towncouncil@amherstma.gov.

Action by the Town Council is likely at its July 1 meeting.

Scott Merzbach can be reached at smerzbach@gazettenet.com.

Daily Hampshire Gazette

(https://www.gazettenet.com)

Adrienne Terrizzi: League of Women Voters supports SRO project

(/byline?byline=)
Published: 6/19/2019 6:00:23 PM

The League of Women Voters has a long history of supporting policies and legislation that provide provisions for low- and moderate-income housing and a suitable living environment affordable for all.

LWV of Amherst has carefully followed the proposed project at 132 Northampton Road and is in strong support of its development. After several years of public meetings and forums, and an intense search for a suitable mixed-use location, we believe that the Valley Community Development Corporation's proposal to create studio-size units with related services and to provide stability of place to our lowest income individuals, the working poor, as a positive direction for local housing needs heretofore unavailable in Amherst.

Further, the League supports the renovation of existing houses whenever possible, another of the project's components. We have yet another opportunity to learn the details of this project and urge Amherst residents to attend the open meeting on June 24 , at 6:30 p.m., in the Town Room, Town Hall.

Adrienne Terrizzi

Amherst

Commentary (/Commentary/)

Ginny Hamilton: 'We don't get to choose our neighbors'

By Ginny Hamilton

Wednesday, June 19, 2019

Before moving to Amherst, we lived in a tidy residential neighborhood of Boston. Our one-block, one-way street was a mix of single-family homes, duplexes, and triple-decker condos, almost all of which were owner-occupied.

The exception was the shuttered Catholic elementary school on the corner and its accompanying parish house. We were the kind of neighbors who greeted each other from our postage-stamp gardens, and did it up for Halloween. When an early-morning kitchen fire trapped residents on their third-floor porch, neighbors had a ladder in place before the fire department arrived.

During our decade there, Pine Street Inn, the largest homeless shelter and supportive housing provider in Boston, took over management of the parish house. Even after Pine Street Inn developed the property into 26 single-room-occupancy (SRO) units — all for very low income individuals coming out of homelessness and back into permanent housing — neighborhood property values continued to rise.

According to Zillow, our two-bedroom condo is now worth almost twice what we sold it for six years ago, even though it's across the street from this supportive housing program.

The SRO residents were good neighbors. A multiracial mix of men and women, most kept to themselves. One had no choice but to be more visible, given his use of a wheelchair to get around. Come winter, he and I bonded over the frustrations of snow mounds hindering stroller wheels for me, and so much more for him.

Another resident was more outgoing, starting a dog-walking business. His gentle smile and pack of fluffy charges drew my toddler's attention and gained his trust and friendship. Good neighbors.

The problem neighbor? The 20-something next door who moved back in with his parents and seemed to be dealing drugs out of their living room. The disruptive neighbors? Those across the fence who blasted "Sweet Caroline" and sang along, drunkenly out of tune, during every Red Sox game.

We don't get to choose our neighbors, not by law and not by our professed moral code. Laws preventing housing discrimination protect the right of housing choice for people with disabilities, including mental health and substance abuse. Case law supports the integration of congregate living and supportive housing into residential neighborhoods.

Even municipalities and municipal officials have legal obligations to promote integrated housing, particularly municipalities that receive federal community development block grant funds, which Amherst does.

We don't get to choose who lives next door. Neighbors who start their Harleys at the crack of dawn on Sundays, or who set up the karaoke machine in the backyard, or who own a particularly yappy Chihuahua, may also lend a cup of sugar and take in your mail during vacation.

Neighbors who can't afford market rents nearby or who may be in recovery may also care for Fido, share tomatoes from their garden, and cheer your morning with friendly conversation.

What if homeowners propose significant structural changes? Yes, we get to have our say. And the neighbors of Valley CDC's project at 132 Northampton Road will have their say in the zoning process, just as if the new owner of the modest cape next door were proposing a McMansion.

But we don't get to have a say in who lives there.

Ginny Hamilton worked at the intersection of civil rights and housing for over 12 years, including as the director of public policy for Massachusetts Coalition for the Homeless and as the executive director of the Fair Housing Center of Greater Boston.

1/2

GUEST COLUMN 6/21/19

Valley CDC project a good fit for Amherst

By MAURIANNE ADAMS

Shortly after 2008, as the economy and housing market remained in recession, I read financial newsletters to better understand what was happening to the Amherst housing and rental market.

Investors, I discovered, were encouraged to invest in house purchases or rental development in college towns for the best bang for their buck, with a 6-9 percent projected return. No wonder out-of-town investors were buying up Amherst homes to turn into over-priced student rentals, creating a new high-end "normal" for Amherst housing.

More recently, as the economy has recovered, we've seen large residential developments marketed as high-end rentals at the same moment that Amherst is trying to maintain affordable rentals in Echo Hill and Rolling Green. Now the town is facing the loss of Amherst Motel and the eviction of its low-rent tenants to make room for something pricier. Where will those tenants live now that they are priced out of the Amherst rental market?

Amherst is a progressive town, even though off-campus student developments abutting Kendrick Park were approved without "inclusionary zoning" (meaning both affordable and market rate rental units) and the even larger North Square (Beacon) development has given us affordable units once the town approved 130 apartments, split 80/20 percent between market rate and affordable rents.

Into this picture enters Valley Community Development Corporation, an experienced nonprofit developer of affordable housing with a long track record of housing formerly homeless and low- and middle-income tenants.

Valley CDC deliberated with multiple Amherst bodies before proposing 28 mixed-income rentals that would house eight workforce individuals earning 50 percent of our area median income (AMI at $31,050) and eight earning up to 80 percent AMI ($49,700) — people with whom we interact with daily in town, in our schools and on our campuses. These people are entry level teachers, school aides, support staff and maintenance workers; dental technicians and medical assistants; clerks at downtown stores and offices, restaurants, pizza parlors and bars.

Thus, 16 of the 28 studio apartments will accommodate middle-income workforce and the remaining 12 units, at 30 percent AMI level ($18,650), provides a preference for formerly homeless people and two set-asides for disabled residents.

All of this was clearly laid out in Valley CDC's proposal to Community Preservation Act Committee, and in its subsequent detailed responses to concerns raised by abutters and neighbors when the address of a building purchased by Valley CDC for this purpose, 132 Northampton Road, rang alarm bells for folks who

6/21/19
2/2

considered the location of this project too close for comfort and who misunderstood the nature of the population to be served.

So how did the loaded term, SRO, or single-room occupancy, become the term of contention for opposition to this project? For better or worse, it was the technical or policy term overwhelmingly approved at spring 2017 Town Meeting, on the recommendation of the Planning Board.

Perhaps at that moment we were unaware of the stigma and stereotypes that had been attached over time, and in mainly urban settings, to SROs through their exaggerated identification with low-income or previously homeless individuals, assumed to be male, at times with racial overtones, and at times associated with drug or alcohol use and violence.

Thus, while the affirmative Town Meeting vote enabled Valley CDC to explore plans for an "enhanced SRO" facility to serve low- and extremely low-income individuals, the nonprofit has since settled on a different plan and developed its proposal for 28 mixed-income studio apartments for middle- and low-income rental housing.

Valley CDC's decision to offer studio apartments as mixed-income rentals ranging from 30-80 percent AMI is a plan in everyone's best interest: the town, the neighborhood and the tenants. And that's the plan they proposed to CPAC, that CPAC recommended to the Finance Committee of the new Town Council, and is now the subject of an open meeting to be held by the council on June 24.

I write as a retired professor and lifelong educator who is shocked and disheartened by the absence of attention to what Valley CDC actually proposed and CPAC recommended, and which can readily be accessed on the town website for the Affordable Housing Trust, labeled under Northampton Road Project, Documents.

It is important that the council not prematurely enable abutter fears and concerns that have already been answered by Valley CDC's documents. There will be ample opportunity, once the council approves the proposed bond issue that will enable the town to leverage over $4 million in state funding, for all interested parties to discuss the details of the project — size, dimension, safety, traffic, supervision, Valley-tenant-neighborhood liaison — as well as create opportunities to welcome to Amherst the workforce who have been priced out of the Amherst rental market.

But if we pre-empt this process, we are in danger of creating a double standard — one for profit-based developments and a different one for affordable mixed-income middle and low-income tenants.

Maurianne Adams is a 40-year Amherst resident and a retired UMA professor, active in neighborhood sustainability and affordable housing.

CITIES & TOWNS

6/22/19

STAFF PHOTO/KEVIN GUTHRIE

Owen Tauscher, 4, of Southampton, straddles a bump in the road on his new bike during a jaunt around Easthampton's Nonotuck Park with his mother, Julianne Tauscher, younger brother, Lydon, 20 months, and the family dog, Molly, 11, who enjoyed a dip in Nashawannuck Pond on the Tuesday afternoon trek. Both of Owen's parents are competitive cyclists.

AMHERST

Some object to single-room occupancy project

By SCOTT MERZBACH
Staff Writer

AMHERST — A proposed 28-room building that would house extremely low-income individuals, including some transitioning from homelessness, is beginning to raise concerns from some nearby residents about whether the size and scope of the project are right for the neighborhood.

At a Community Resources Committee meeting of the Town Council earlier this month, several residents advised councilors to be cautious about appropriating money to assist in converting a single-family home at 132 Northampton Road into what is known as a single-room occupancy, or SRO, project.

"This is a concerning development," said Steve George, of 23 Dana St.

George said that the project would be more suitable if it were housing a smaller number of tenants. Having 28 residents on a small parcel with limited open space will likely have impacts on neighboring homes, George said.

Valley CDC is depending on the town appropriating money from the Community Preservation Act account, which will be determined by the Town Council as part of the budget process.

The CPA Committee is recommending that the town borrow $500,000 to support the project, in which each unit will be about 240 square feet and have a kitchenette and bathroom, with the building also including common areas and a provider office.

Valley CDC would be responsible for coordinating ongoing on-site services to the residents, as well as community-based services for the individuals.

The agency will also seek money from the state Housing Innovations Fund and Affordable Housing Trust Fund, both for $1 million, and then a comprehensive permit under the state's chapter 40B law, which will require a Zoning Board of Appeals special permit hearing.

If all goes according to plan, the construction would begin in April 2021, with occupancy to start in May 2022 and full occupancy to be achieved in July 2022.

John Hornik, chairman of the Amherst Municipal Affordable Housing Trust, said even though Valley CDC is requesting town spending, the appropriateness of the project should not be a matter before councilors, but rather the ZBA when the

SEE CDC PROJECT B2

CDC project

6/22/19

FROM B1

project comes for review.

Hornik said there is an "overblown fear" of the people who would live at the SRO building, and that if the town backs away from its support, there would be no other places where similar development would be acceptable.

Kate Troast, of 99 Dana St., said such redevelopment of a property should fit into the neighborhood, but having 28 new beds may be too many.

"To me, the size of the structure will be out of scale with its surroundings," Troast said.

Tim Atteridge, of 143 Northampton Road, whose home is adjacent to the property, said told councilors he is not sure the project fits with the town's master plan, which encourages such developments to maintain the character of the street.

"I can't see how it's going to enhance the character of our neighborhood," Atteridge said.

Valley CDC brings extensive experience with similar projects, owning and operating four sites with 53 studio apartments in Northampton and Florence. It has also worked in Amherst to create 11 family rental units at 683-687 Main St., completed in 2008, and eight homes on Charles Lane, sold to homeowners in 1996.

Councilors will have to make a decision, as with all spending and fiscal year 2020 budget matters, prior to July 1.

In District 4, Counselor Stephen Schreiber said he and Counselor Evan Ross earlier this week held a district meeting at which they heard both concerns and support for the project. Some of the concerns, he said, included the number of units, the hours of on-site management, the mix of prospective tenants, the distance from bus stops, and the proximity to the college's playing fields. The support for the project included integrating affordable housing into established neighborhoods, particularly if the housing is for families and will serve both men and women.

Scott Merzbach can be reached at smerzbach@gazettenet.com.

GUEST COLUMN

SRO project provides chance to talk about homelessness

By DEENA RUBIN

Several weeks ago, my daughter Yael called me in a distressed tone. Her place of employment, Project PLASE, that serves homeless people, failed to find a home for a mother and her pregnant daughter.

Project PLASE provides housing and services for homeless citizens of Baltimore. I am so proud that my daughter is working on behalf of people in such grave need. I see a dire situation happening here in Amherst as well.

In Massachusetts we are the only state with a so-called "right-to-shelter" law, meaning that state and local officials must provide shelter to people experiencing homelessness who are requesting services. In Amherst, we are seeing increasing number of unsheltered homeless people.

Many people are one paycheck away from losing everything. Potentially, 47 percent of homeless women have a major untreated depressive disorder which makes group living in shelters challenging (Buckner, Beardsley, Bassuk, 2004).

Although there are services available, some individuals do not have the ability or skills to fill out the complicated forms required to maintain subsidized housing. That can lead to the unsheltered population that is extremely at risk in our community.

Craig's Place is a winter shelter here in Amherst led by Executive Director Rebeka Wilder. She says that wintertime is particularly rough for those living on the street. However, Craig's Place closed at the end of April for the warmer months. What these people need is permanent year-round housing.

I met a woman who heads the homeless program in Cape Cod. She said that once a person is given a home, their entire lifestyle changes positively and they continue to improve.

... once a person is given a home, their entire lifestyle changes positively and they continue to improve.

A partial solution to this extreme problem in Amherst has been proposed to provide housing for a chosen number of individuals at 132 Northampton Road at single-room occupancy (SRO). Neighbors have expressed concern about the proposed number of 28 low-income individuals who would reside there.

John Hornick, chairman of the Amherst Municipal Affordable Housing Trust, said that there is an "overblown fear" of the SRO building. I agree. Fear of people in need is another form of prejudice and hatred, two issues that have expanded since the 2016 election. We need as a people to move toward inclusion and understanding.

In anticipation of problems, Amherst College Dean Gendron stated that access to Pratt Field may be shut off by the college if any difficulties develop. Why are we so worried about a small homeless population, but ignore the behavior of students and other neighbors?

Both communities can bring challenges and rewards to Amherst. I hope that Amherst College students will be able to use the opportunity to discuss homelessness and improve methods by sharing their space with people in need.

I encourage the neighbors and community to think of the best ways to welcome these carefully selected people to their new home.

Deena Rubin is an educator in Amherst.

News (/News/)

Amherst neighbors sound off on housing project

By BERA DUNAU
Staff Writer

Thursday, June 27, 2019

AMHERST — More than 100 people packed into the the Bangs Community Center Monday evening to weigh in on a proposed affordable housing project at 132 Northampton Road.

And while a number of neighbors were opposed to the proposed 28-unit Valley Community Development Corp. project as proposed, many residents also expressed support, including some neighbors.

The forum, held before Town Council, began with presentations from town committee members, representatives of the Valley CDC and neighbors opposing the project in its current form.

Then, after laying out a timeline for the project and some questions from the councilors, public comment was opened up.

All units in the approximately $5 million project would be single-room occupancy units — studio apartments. Eight would be reserved for those making $31,050 annually or less, eight would be reserved for those making $49,700 or less, 10 would be reserved for those making $18,650 or less, with a preference for the homeless, and two units would be reserved for those making $18,650 or less who are clients of the Department of Mental Health.

The Town Council will likely vote July 1 on whether to approve borrowing $500,000 in Community Preservation Act funds to help the project get built.

Nate Budington, the chairman of Amherst's Community Preservation Act Committee, said that about half of the committee's votes this year have been split. However, he said that the 132 Northampton Road proposal was endorsed unanimously and enthusiastically.

"The proposal gets to the heart of the CPA's affordable housing mandate," Budington said.

He also said the future residents of the development are already living in the community.

"This project will dramatically improve the lives of our most vulnerable neighbors," he said.

Most of those who spoke against the project stressed that they didn't oppose affordable housing, or even affordable housing at the site, but instead didn't support it as currently envisioned.

Neighborhood resident Stephen George said the current proposal would be "an extreme outlier" compared with what is in the neighborhood now.

Kate Sims, another neighborhood resident, said Valley CDC has not been receptive to neighbors' requests for round-the-clock supervision at the development, a smaller scale for the project or mixing in family-oriented units.

"Nothing has actually changed about their plan," she said.

She suggested the town acquire the site itself for affordable housing and provide a long-term lease to the developer. She said that this would allow development there to have neighborhood input from the start.

Neighborhood resident Michael Giles, however, backed the plan as it currently stands, and he said he knew of a large number of neighbors in favor of the project.

"One of the best ways to stop a project is to say that you are really in favor of it, except you want a little more time to consider it, and try to tweak it a little bit and make it a little bit better," he said.

Kathy Neale, who was a longtime resident of the neighborhood before moving to Amity Place, said she supported to the project and noted that many teachers starting out travel an hour or more to work in Amherst schools because they can't afford to live in places like Amherst.

"Please don't just think of this as the homeless place," she said. "Please think of this as a place that is inclusive of people who have chosen to teach your children."

Neighborhood resident Kate Troast said that the process around the proposed development has been horrible and that the neighbors have been vilified for asking questions.

"I've been called all kinds of names," she said.

She also said that the developer has refused to change anything.

"Why should we trust that?" she said.

Pamela, a former resident of the Valley CDC's SRO in Northampton on Bridge Street, said she feels extremely safe in that community, and will be moving back once it is renovated.

On an SRO building coming to Amherst, Pamela said, "It's going to benefit your community."

Commentary (/Commentary/)

Guest column Lilly Gaev: Valley CDC's project a benefit to Northampton neighborhood

By Lilly Gaev

Wednesday, June 26, 2019

Since 2004, when I purchased and renovated the O'Connell Funeral Home at 94 King St. in Northampton, I have had the good fortune of participating in and enjoying the further development and thriving of a sense of community on the King and Trumbull block of Route 5.

This additional blossoming has been enhanced by Valley Community Development Corporation's beautiful renovation and development of a stately Victorian into 10 units of studio apartments — five for those out of homelessness, and five for lower income singles. Valley CDC had intended to build a 6 foot high fence, for our privacy, down the middle of the shared lawn that divides our two Northampton properties.

I insisted that not happen because it risked being a shaming statement of "otherness." We've split up lawn and hedge maintenance; we get to admire their attractive landscaping, including flowers, shrubs, and garden path lighting.

Valley CDC's building renovation displays a high quality of workmanship and commitment to the preservation of the architectural period. If anything, their building has offered a value-enhancing compliment to our King Street block.

I've owned the neighboring Queen Ann property at 94 King St. for over 15 years. Its heritage included its first 50 years where a family doctor practiced and raised his family. The O'Connell family followed suit, serving the community next as a funeral home while they too made it their family residence. Now it provides office nests for clinicians, including physicians, psychologists, and massage therapists; from which they nurture the growth and healing of their clients. Around the corner, on Trumbull Road, are single-family homes of the same period, with several that have long ago been attractively converted to two- or three-family homes.

When our plans to renovate the property next to ours in a similar vein required redirection in 2011; we chose to seek out a nonprofit that would benefit from the innately ideal housing potential of 98 King St. It had the unique historical and architectural distinctions of having been built in the Victorian-era as an intentional multifamily home. It was across the street from ServiceNet, on the bus line, and walk to town.

And most importantly, it was located in a thriving, pedestrian active, and increasingly flourishing neighborhood with lovely side streets of historical single and multifamily homes. From here, those of us who have been marginalized through life's vicissitudes could come out of shame and hiding into the mainstream of community life, saying hi to neighbors, being helpful, and finding jobs.

Route 9 in Amherst and Route 5 in Northampton share many features, in that their neighborhood attributes change along their extended routes. It makes the same community-building sense with the proposed Amherst housing as it has in Northampton — to create affordable living opportunities through mutually respectful, tastefully compatible, and compassionate neighborhood integration.

Amherst is generally liberal thinking and proactive, abutting neighbors now have an opportunity to walk their walk, as generous socially conscientious folks — literally to walk over and get to know someone from another walk of life who deserves every opportunity for healing and life success and who deserves to be seen and respected.

In eight years, not one of my professional tenants, nor any of their clients, have ever received anything less than pleasantness from our studio apartment dwelling neighbors. In contrast, surely every one of us has experienced everything from thoughtless oversights, to blatant rudeness, to raucous teenage house parties, to domestic violence outbursts from our well-heeled and highly valued real estate owning abutters.

And worthy of even more note is that their endeavor gives each of us an opportunity to share the neighborhood's graces as we rub shoulders with our fellow life travelers; teaching our children to be blind to false distinctions; reaching inward to access and grow our better selves.

In the words of Phil Ochs "There, but For Fortune, go You and I, You and I."

Lilly Gaev is a licensed social worker and clinical director Therapeutic Associates, PC in Northampton and Longmeadow.

SRO editorial dismisses concerns of neighbors

I write in response to the Gazette's editorial advocating the advance of the proposed SRO project in Amherst ("Advance SRO project in Amherst," June 14).

In embracing the proposal wholeheartedly, the editorial dismisses concerns neighbors have about its size and conception as typical NIMBYism, and notes that Valley CDC has operated similar projects in other communities "without any incident of violence to neighbors."

That standard for assessing the community impact of a significant SRO facility sets a pretty low bar, and I am left wondering: What precisely are the general effects of such projects in residential areas? As we all consider how best to increase affordable housing in Amherst, which is a significant and important problem, I think it would be a real service to those considering this issue in good faith to know more about whether the concerns raised in the letter sent to Amherst Town Council have or have not been borne out in other nearby communities, particularly those noted in the editorial.

Trustworthy information, difficult to come by these days, can help to overcome the tendency to caricature differing opinions. At the least, I hope the Gazette's perspective on town politics in Amherst will remain committed to its usual clear-eyed and informative reportage as our new governance structure takes on difficult questions of this sort.

6/27/19

MARTHA UMPHREY
Amherst

6/29/19

GUEST COLUMN

Shameocracy in the town of Amherst

By DAVE HUBER and ROSIE COWELL

On June 14, the editorial board of the Gazette labeled neighbors of the proposed housing development at 132 Northampton Road in Amherst as NIMBYs.

The editors claimed that substantive concerns raised by neighbors were a cover for their distaste for low-income housing, writing, "They don't want this project in their backyard, but instead of saying that, they use health and safety concerns for ... tenants and residents." Subsequently, this editorial was cited during a June 24 town meeting as evidence of neighbors' NIMBYism.

We are some of the neighbors who have been profiled in this way. Neighbors with concerns over the proposal in its current form recently completed a survey, answered anonymously, revealing that 91 percent are in favor of affordable housing in our neighborhood. But it turns out that, according to many in Amherst, it's morally reprehensible to raise questions or concerns over any detail of a proposal, if the goal of that proposal is admirable.

You might say to the neighbors who have been reprehended: sticks and stones may break your bones. But the real cost of this bullying is the health of our democracy. When the authors of alternative views are discredited based on their perceived moral position rather than the merits of their views — when we critique people, rather than ideas — we edge toward Orwellian groupthink. Shame is a tool to enable groupthink, and the neighbors of 132 Northampton Road have been targeted by an effective shame campaign.

In a recent letter, Nicola Usher said "there aren't two sides to social justice." Concerning whether social justice is an admirable goal, we agree wholeheartedly. Concerning the most effective policy to achieve social justice, we strongly disagree.

The stifling of the democratic process squanders a critical opportunity. The goal of this major project is worthy — on that we all agree — but what if the proposal has flaws? When there is a high social cost to asking questions, flaws will never be identified. In this case, censure was not the only barrier to open dialogue: the proposal was approved by the Community Preservation Act Committee one day before the first informational meeting with neighbors.

But constructive criticism is healthy. Just as having two political parties is key to national democracy, we need voices that identify concerns; while some concerns will turn out to be unfounded, others will prompt crucial improvements.

How is democracy doing in the town of Amherst? In response to constructive criticism from neighbors, the developer produced a document accusing neighbors of "bias" and "profiling" and the town posted it online. Town staff have written to neighbors, calling them "classist" and "racist." Community members have berated neighbors in the street.

Over 50 neighbors signed a letter to the Town Council stating: "We are not saying not in our backyard. We are saying please get this right, because it's our backyard."

The editors of the Gazette quoted just the first of these two sentences and followed it with, "But that's exactly what these residents are saying." The editors — important guardians of information in our local democracy — apparently printed this statement without any direct investigation of the neighbors' perspective.

Of course, in truth there is a diversity of neighborhood opinion regarding concerns and favored solutions. But, for a substantial number of us, the primary concern is that the plan will provide inadequate support for the vulnerable, formerly homeless tenants it hopes to serve, resulting in failure of this mixed-income development. The cost of failure will be steep.

The proposal assumes that individuals emerging from homelessness will thrive given little more than a roof, contradicting Housing and Urban Development guidelines for permanent supportive housing. In a letter to the town council supporting the project, an individual who at one time experienced homelessness cautioned "you will need to hire enough trained, qualified house managers ... this new place won't succeed with a skeleton crew."

We asked whether this developer's existing housing in Northampton is living up to expectations. In April, Valley CDC told us that a typical week or month sees no emergency service calls to their Northampton single-occupancy properties, admitting that they'd have to verify this with their management company.

In fact, Northampton emergency services dispatch records revealed a high call volume indicative of safety concerns, with almost nine times the medical emergencies per tenant per year than in the city of Northampton. Many neighbors are requesting 24/7 support to mitigate safety risks to the tenants.

This is not babysitting; it is a support professional, like at Craig's Doors, UMass dorms, and many apartment buildings across the U.S. The development corporation has declined this request, which would impact their financial plan.

Amherst must do better than this. We cannot allow misguided intolerance of dissent to silence the voices demanding an open dialogue and a better plan for our new neighbors at 132 Northampton Road.

This column was co-authored by Anne Belt Ye, Barbara Gravin Wilbur and John Willoughby.

GUEST COLUMN

A true test for the Amherst Town Council

By KATE SIMS
and TIMOTHY ATTERIDGE

The proposed 28-unit single occupant development at 132 Northampton Road may end up being a good project. But when the new Town Council decides on Monday whether to support the project with Community Preservation Act funding, they face a true test of their support for meaningful neighborhood participation in development plans.

As it currently stands, this is a developer-driven model and project. At the town's 2017 forum on homelessness, the developer (Valley CDC), led a promotional event entitled "Studio Apartments coming to Amherst." They then lobbied for a change to town law that would allow them to build a development with lots of small apartments — a revenue-maximizing model — as long as they were affordable. They sought a grant from the town to select a site, and in January of this year, they purchased 132 Northampton Road.

In any true participatory planning process, a developer would then ask for feedback from key stakeholders. They would hold meetings with the most affected neighbors and next develop a plan. Amherst's Housing Production Plan calls specifically for this meaningful neighborhood input.

Instead, Valley CDC began a marketing campaign in coordination with town officials. After encountering questions at a Community Development Block Grant hearing, the Amherst Municipal Affordable Housing Trust spoke in February of a need to "quell the false concerns."

Valley CDC and Affordable Housing Trust lined up positive letters from related organizations.

The developer sought the key recommendation from the Council's Community and Resources Committee on the afternoon of April 24, before any hard questions were asked about their process or design (see CPAC and CRC minutes from April).

On the evening of April 24, Valley CDC announced its plans for a 12,000-square-foot building to neighbors, in a meeting that was informative but in no way participatory. Neighbors organized quickly and were able — with dozens of hours spent at town meetings — to get a single, open, adversarial meeting with Town Council in attendance earlier this week.

Given an analysis of emergency calls at comparable Valley CDC properties in Northampton, one of the changes suggested was for more on-site supportive care. Another was to explore alternative building designs, since the current plan is 20-30 percent above benchmark cost for affordable housing in the region. More people could be helped with the same money.

Yet online and print campaigns prior to and during the event characterized all opposition to the specific project design as prejudiced and against progressive values. No changes have been made to the developer's plan and the Town Council Finance Committee this week voted to recommend it.

Is this how the Town Council intends to proceed with the major building projects in town? They will accept developer-driven plans and models with no participatory process by neighborhoods? In the future, will anyone who speaks up with suggested improvements to a proposed plan for a new library or a new school be labeled as anti-education and anti-children?

If this is the way the Town Council intends to run process, it should concern every single member of the town.

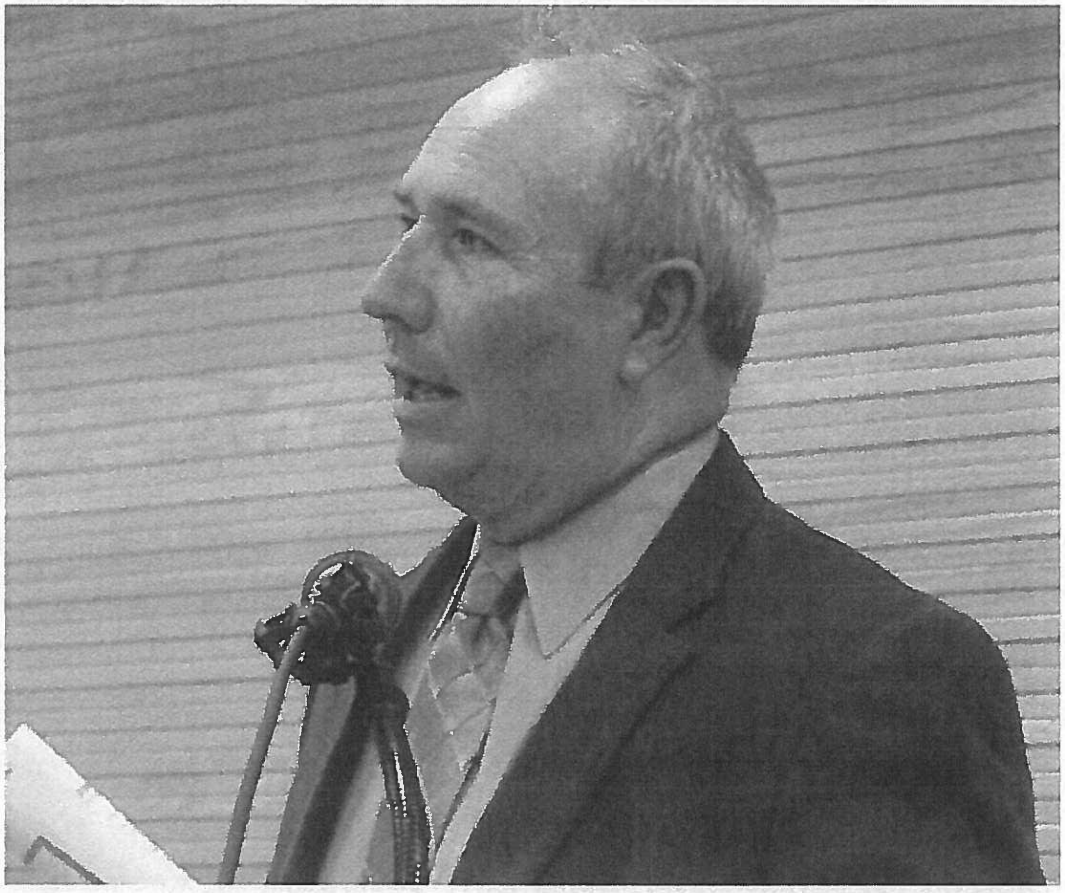
We urge the Town Council to have the courage to vote no on CPA funding. Ask the developer and Affordable Housing Trust to reboot the process and engage neighbors and abutters of this site in a meaningful participatory process from the start. The fundamentals of town governance are at stake.

This column was co-authored by Stephen George, Aimee Gilbert Loinaz, Barbara Gravin Wilbur, Hallie Hughes, Will Loinaz, and Kate Troast. They live on Northampton Road, Orchard Street and Dana Street.

NEWS

Critics of Amherst housing project urge town to delay spending $500K on it

Posted Jun 26, 2019



Amherst Police Chief Scott Livingstone speaking at Amherst Town Council 'Open Meeting of the Residents' on Monday, June 24, 2019. (Jim Russell photo)

6

0 shares

By Jim Russell | Special to The Republican

Menu Set Weather MASS LIVE Subscribe Sign In Search

on Route 9 when critics urged Town Council to delay spending an additional $500,000 on it.

Proponents said the affordable housing project at 132 Northampton Road is needed, would not negatively impact the community, and that it's location allows residents easy access to shopping and a bus route.

Critics who spoke and who reside near where it would be built, said more information is needed, and question whether it is accurate to say it would not impact the neighborhood surrounding it that includes many single family homes.

They said it would be a mistake for the Council to cede its financial leverage — that could be used to obtain more details about it — by approving the money at this time, and urged the Council to delay action.

The zoning district where the project is proposed prohibits a housing development with that degree of density.

Northampton-based Valley Community Development Corporation, the project developer, has requested the money. They are a private, not for profit organization established by Casa Latina in 1988, and have developed 224 units of affordable housing.

To date, $250,000 of Amherst money has gone to this Valley CDC project.

Town Council, which convened the special "Open Meeting of the Residents," is expected to decide on July 1 whether to approve the non-profit's request for $500,000, which come

Menu Set Weather MASS LIVE Subscribe Sign In Search

vote in favor was 5 to 0.

At the Monday night full council meeting, Councilor Dorothy Pam said, "many of us have asked for more specifics about the management."

She said, "we are just being asked to take it on trust," adding: "I don't know why we can't get more details" so "we can make an informed vote on this important issue."

Prior to last year's change from a town meeting to a town council form of government, the expenditure would have required town meeting's approval; now it is the council's duty to make the decision.

The charter allows for the council to convene an Open Meeting of the Residents as a means to get input, as the format specifically permits folks to make formal presentations or share their thoughts.

Council President Lynn Griesemer, at the start of Monday's meeting said "it is meant to be a conversation by residents."

The requested money, if approved, could potentially help the Valley CDC in their comprehensive permit application to the state, by showing that the community supports the project.

The 28 units proposed, in one building, are much more, in terms of density, than the zoning designation for the area allows -- so much so, that it exceeds any variance even a special permit would allow, according to the Amherst planning department.

Menu Set Weather MASS LIVE Subscribe Sign In Search

Consequently, the Valley is seeking state approval for the comprehensive permit, and if that is approved, local zoning bylaws would not apply, at which time, Valley could apply to the Amherst Zoning Board of Appeals for permission to build it. That process is expected to take many months.

The ZBA would retain authority to issue conditions that Valley must adhere to as a condition for approval. Should Valley CDC make an application with the ZBA, the board has six months to convene public hearings and eventually make a decision.

Resident Michael Giles of Blue Hill Road spoke in favor of the project.

"I trust the Valley Community Development Corporation," he said. "I have faith adjustments will be made" to the project if need be.

During Monday's meeting, Amherst Police Chief Scott Livingstone responded to a question about whether the 28-unit proposal could create problems.

If managed properly, "I don't anticipate many problems," he said.

According to Laura Baker, Valley CDC's Real Estate Property Manager, the current plan calls for a 20 hour per week resident services coordinator at the housing complex. There was much discussion at Monday's meeting on whether that would be adequate. She said potential tenants would be properly screened.

Menu Set Weather MASS LIVE Subscribe Sign In Search

Resident Stephen George of Dana St. said "the neighborhood itself is primarily one and two-family" dwellings. The area "is surrounded by residential" property, he said. "Right now, I don't support the proposal; there are problems," he said. "It will be an extreme outlier in the area."

Valley CDC bought the Northampton Road property for $407,500 in January, with a mortgage in that amount from Community Economic Development Assistance Corporation.

View Comments (6)

Note to readers: if you purchase something through one of our affiliate links we may earn a commission.

SPONSOR CONTENT

A Smarter Way to Fly to Europe

Daily Hampshire Gazette

(https://www.gazettenet.com)

Amherst Town Council OKs affordable housing project

132 Northampton Rd in Amherst where the Single Occupancy Housing is proposed to go.

By BERA DUNAU (/byline?byline=By BERA DUNAU)
Staff Writer
Published: 7/2/2019 12:15:38 AM

AMHERST — By a nearly unanimous vote Monday, the Town Council approved Community Preservation Act funding for a proposed 28-unit affordable housing project at 132 Northampton Road.

The vote was 11 in favor and one abstention to appropriate $500,000 for the Valley Community Development Corp. project. District 5 Councilor Shalini Bahl-Milne was not in attendance at the meeting.

"We're of course pleased that it got funded," said Laura Baker, Valley CDC real estate project manager.

Of the units in the proposed development, all of which would be single room occupancy units, eight would be reserved for those making $31,050 annually or less; eight would be reserved for those making $49,700 or less; 10 would be reserved for those making $18,650 or less, with a preference for the homeless; and two units would be reserved for those making $18,650 or less who are clients of the Department of Mental Health.

The project has drawn objections from several people in the neighborhood, some of whom used the public comment period on the matter to once again note their disapproval.

"I have never been against affordable housing," said abutting neighbor Barbara Gravin Wilbur.

She went on to suggest that the city focus on providing affordable housing for families over single people.

Neighborhood resident Aimee Gilbert Loinaz said she is a public health professional, and said there would be a need for 24-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week services at the facility.

"Where is the programming expertise?" she asked.

She also criticized the development process for a lack of neighborhood outreach, and suggested that the screening process Valley CDC uses for tenants could be in danger of violating the law.

District 3 Councilor Dorothy Pam, who abstained in the final vote, suggested that the council wait on voting for the project.

"I am asking that we postpone this vote tonight," she said.

She expressed a desire to see more about the supervision plan for the site from Valley CDC, and expressed concern at the prospect of tenants not being able to have overnight guests. She also said that those who have asked questions have been shamed and accused of opposing affordable housing and hating homeless people.

"That's not true for me and I don't think it's true for the residents," she said.

Asked after the vote about the overnight guest policy, Baker said that no policy forbidding overnight guests has been decided on for the 132 Northampton Road property. Baker also said that none of Valley CDC's properties has 24-hour supervision.

"It is not typical in affordable housing," she said

Pam's suggestion to delay the vote didn't gain traction with her fellow councilors.

"I find it incredible that anyone would say that this has been rushed," said District 4 Councilor Evan Ross, who said he first learned about it in January.

"It's been consuming more time than any other singular issue," he said.

"To delay would be ridiculous," said District 2 Councilor Patricia De Angelis.

Nevertheless, De Angelis did say that both sides of the issue needed to find more ways to talk across distances and move forward together.

Some of the councilors also said that issues with the plan would be best figured out in the zoning process.

Speaking in favor of the project, resident John Page noted that he himself had grown up in affordable housing.

"Amherst needs the people that need affordable housing," he said, naming teachers, firefighters, people getting started in their careers, seniors and people with disabilities as beneficiaries.

Nate Buddington, who chairs the town's Community Preservation Act Committee, rejected the call for 24-hour-a-day supervision for the proposed development.

"This isn't a halfway house and it's not a mental health facility," he said. "It's housing for low-income people."Baker said the next step for the project will be to prepare a package to get a project eligibility letter from the state, after which an application would be submitted to the town's Zoning Board of Appeals.

Bera Dunau can be reached at bdunau@gazettenet.com.

Menu Set Weather MASS LIVE Subscribe Sign In Search

Amherst Town Council approves giving $500K to developer planning 28 affordable studio units

Posted Jul 2, 2019

Laura Baker, Valley Community Development Corp.'s real estate property manager, speaks at the Amherst Town Council's meeting at Bangs Community Center on June 24, 2019. (Jim Russell photo)

12 0 shares

By Jim Russell | Special to The Republican

AMHERST — Against the objections of nearby homeowners, the Town Council voted Monday to allocate $500,000 to a nonprofit planning to create 28 affordable studio apartments along Route 9 near the intersection with Route 116.

Amherst previously granted the developer, Valley Community Development Corp. of Northampton, $250,000 to help fund the project slated for 132 Northampton Road, where

But before that can happen, Valley CDC must obtain state approval. That is because the proposed housing complex does not meet the zoning requirements for that piece of land, and, according to Amherst's planning department, the density is so great that a special permit still might not allow it.

Critics of Amherst housing project urge town to delay spending $500K on it

State approval would come in the form of a "comprehensive permit" that is part of Massachusetts General Laws, Chapter 40B. The law was intended to encourage affordable housing in communities with less than 10% affordable housing.

In a city or town under 10%, a developer who might be denied permits under local zoning has the option to apply for a state permit.

State approval of a 40B permit means that local zoning restrictions on density do not apply. The municipal zoning board keeps its authority to impose conditions on developers who receive comprehensive permits.

In Amherst, the state has deemed that 11% of the housing is affordable.

At a Town Council meeting last week, Valley CDC and town officials said it would take a while before the state issues a decision on any 40B application for this project. The

According to a June 17 document prepared by Valley CDC posted on Amherst's website, "the Town was clear that housing persons who are homeless is a top priority. The Town was also clear that they did not favor a housing model that congregated only homeless persons at one location. The proposed mix of tenants at this property is intentionally diverse."

View Comments (12)

Note to readers: if you purchase something through one of our affiliate links we may earn a commission.

SPONSOR CONTENT

Could This Be the Best Enhancement For Your Off-Road Vehicle? [See the...

7/12/19

Typical NIMBY tactics in play in Amherst

The recent guest columns published in the Gazette by critics of a proposed affordable housing project in Amherst reveal typical NIMBY (not in my backyard) tactics, which are as predictable as they are disingenuous. Those tactics include increasing the development costs and exerting pressure on funding sources, which includes town funding through the Community Preservation Act.

In the case of the Amherst project, NIMBY's are attempting to increase costs by demanding that there be around-the-clock supervision. They do so through prejudice informed by ignorance and fear. In this case, they cite emergency call logs for what they say is a comparable property in Northampton, as if it is valid and appropriate to generalize all people of a certain socio-economic status. This claim also seems to attempt to prejudice the Town Council, which has to consider what increased emergency calls will cost the town. These types of cost-increasing NIMBY tactics are so common that the Department of Housing and Urban Development cites them on their website.

A review of the literature about affordable housing NIMBYism also states that it is most common in homogenous and affluent neighborhoods, much like the Amherst site. NIMBYism is also described as a fear-based phenomenon.

The authors of the guest columns may claim that they are merely looking out for the well-being of the future occupants of the affordable housing project by demanding 24-hour supervision, but they are really speaking out for the well-being of themselves.

MICHAEL SEWARD
Shelburne

CITIES & TOWNS

Hefty grants boost Valley municipal projects

By SCOTT MERZBACH
Staff Writer

Continued infrastructure improvements in the Admiral Street neighborhood in Easthampton, a multiuse path on East Hadley Road in Amherst, and rehabilitation and modernization of affordable housing in South Hadley are among projects in Hampshire County being supported by the state's federally funded Community Development Block Grant program.

Several local communities were announced Friday among 63 across the state receiving $34 million in grants to support housing and community and economic development projects.

"Community Development Block Grants help municipalities address important local needs including social service programs and infrastructure investments," Gov. Charlie Baker said in a statement.

For Easthampton, the $551,958 received under the program will go toward the next phase of infrastructure improvements on and near Admiral Street, including replacing streets, sidewalks, catch basins and sewer lines.

In Amherst, $825,000 will be divided between the ongoing work of building a multiuse path on East Hadley Road, a siding project at Watson Farms apartments by the Amherst Housing Authority, and the predevelopment costs for Valley Community Development Corp.'s planned 28 single-room affordable housing project on Northampton Road. It also will provide support for a food pantry, youth mentoring, adult literacy, immigrant services and family stabilization services.

South Hadley is receiving $550,000 to provide housing rehabilitation assistance to 15 units and for housing authority modernization.

Chesterfield, Cummington, Goshen, Plainfield, Worthington and Peru are sharing $1.23 million for housing rehabilitation for 22 units, planning for a senior center, child care assistance, elder services and support for a food pantry.

Huntington will receive $683,752 for infrastructure improvements to Kennedy Drive. Huntington is also sharing, with Russell and Middlefield, $1.3 million for Pine Hill Road drainage improvements, a building reuse planning project, and for social services to support a food pantry, elder services, adult education and domestic violence prevention.

In southern Franklin County, Shutesbury, with Wendell, will receive $985,000 to provide housing rehabilitation for 18 units.

Scott Merzbach can be reached at smerzbach@gazettenet.com.

1/8/20

AMHERST

Affordable housing project readies request for state funds

28-unit development at house site moving slowly

By SCOTT MERZBACH
Staff Writer

AMHERST — A Northampton nonprofit planning a $5 million affordable housing project on Route 9 will belatedly submit its application for needed state funding later this month.

Laura Baker, real estate project manager for the Valley Community Development Corp., informed the Town Council Monday that the agency remains "strongly committed" to the project in which 28 apartments would be created at an existing home and property it acquired at 132 Northampton Road a year ago.

But Baker acknowledged the project is falling behind its anticipated timeline of being ready for occupancy in 2022 or 2023, with a letter to the state's Department of Housing and Community Development seeking money from the state Housing Innovations Fund and the Affordable Housing Trust Fund not being submitted until late January.

The proposed development, which is being supported by $200,000 from Amherst's Community Development Block Grant, $500,000 the Amherst Town Council agreed to borrow from the Community Preservation Act account and $50,000 from the Charlesbank Foundation, will feature exclusively studio apartments. Eight will be reserved for those making $31,050 annually or less; eight reserved for those making $49,700 or less; 10 reserved for those making $18,650 or less, with a preference for the homeless; and two reserved for those making $18,650 or less who are clients of the Department of Mental Health.

Each unit will be about 240 square feet and have a kitchenette and bathroom, with the building also including common areas and a provider office.

Baker said the reasons for the delay in sending in the application, which was going to happen last fall, included the pending retirement of local architect Kathy Ford, with whom Valley CDC has worked. That forced the agency to seek a new partner to bring the project to completion.

"It was a delay we had not fore-

1/8/20

seen," Baker said.

Valley CDC is now working with Austin Design of Greenfield and Brattleboro, Vermont.

Baker said Valley CDC is also committed to developing and submitting with its application a supportive services plan for the property, which abutters have advocated for.

Baker said other concerns from neighbors have caused additional delays, and she received a number of requests related to the timing of the application, including from councilors who suggested it should be done at a time when most of Amherst's population is in town so people will be around during the 30-day comment period.

Those who live near the project

SEE HOUSING B4

Housing project

FROM B1

site continue to hope for an informed process.

Kate Troast of Dana Street said she remains dismayed by a lack of specific site analysis and recognition of its challenges. "I think the council and the town are really going to hold responsibility for how this turns out," Troast said, adding that she was disappointed there had not been a public update for six months.

But District 4 Councilor Evan Ross praised Valley CDC for keeping the council apprised of the project's progress and said no further presentation to the council was required.

In fact, the next time Valley CDC will have to engage the public about the project is when a comprehensive permit hearing is held by the Zoning Board of Appeals under the state's chapter 40B law.

Scott Merzbach can be reached at smerzbach@gazettenet.com.

THE AMHERST STUDENT
NEWSPAPER

AMHERST COLLEGE STUDENT LETTERS

Nearby Affordable Housing Unit Planned Despite Pushback from Professors

Natalie De Rosa '21

Plans are underway for the development of a new affordable housing unit at 132 Northampton Road, a building adjacent to Pratt Field. The project, which will house 28 low-income and homeless individuals from the town of Amherst, has garnered mixed opinions from the neighborhood's residents, some of whom are affiliated with the college.

This past July, the town council of Amherst voted to provide $500,000 in community development block grants to the project, currently in development by Valley Community Development Corporation (Valley CDC). Valley CDC is a Northampton-based organization that supports low-income people in the Pioneer Valley with affordable housing and other economic opportunities.

Under the approved plan, the project will begin construction in 2021. The site next to Pratt Field, a single-family home that will be converted into a single-room occupancy (SRO) complex, will be Valley CDC's first location in Amherst.

According to Laura Baker, real estate project manager at Valley CDC, the Town of Amherst has been considering a project of this sort for over a decade. "The town has been identifying the need for this kind of housing — these kinds of small, studio apartments for very low-income and vulnerable populations — for maybe the last 12 to 15 years," Baker said.

Lack of affordable housing is a pressing issue in the town of Amherst, a result of its booming college-aged population. According to an October article by Quinn Breen in the UMass student publication Amherst Wire, over 16,000 UMass students live off campus. The town's population comprises nearly 38,000 people. Amherst College also offers an application for students who wish to move off campus, though approval rates vary each year.

"Where does affordable housing go, and why are rent prices so high? It's a big question, but part of the answer is that low-income Amherst residents compete with a major demographic in the housing market: college students," Breen writes. His article was shared 62 times on Facebook.

Breen isn't wrong, Baker said; the housing market in a college town poses challenges when choosing a property for a SRO complex.

"There are a lot of credit-investor landlord types looking to buy single-family properties and convert them to student housing, because it's lucrative and there are a fair number of cash buyers," Baker said. "It was a challenging market to buy into because we're competing with people who can move faster than we can."

The location across from Pratt Field is optimal, Baker said, noting its access to the center of town and nearby grocery outlets. "Most of our tenants will be walking or biking or using buses, so we really prioritized having a location close to things and ideally [for tenants] to be able to walk to things," Baker said.

The site's proximity to the college is a particular benefit to tenants, Baker added. While the site is farther from the center of campus, the athletic fields are another amenity for residents.

"We know that people from the neighborhood are permitted to use the field. It's usually pretty quiet there, except when there's a big game," Baker said. "We thought there could be some really positive interactions with students who might want to volunteer." Such opportunities include tutoring tenants for the GED and hosting a housewarming event at the site to connect tenants with the surrounding community, Baker said.

Yet, the site's adjacency to Pratt Field is a point of contention for some of the neighborhood's residents. In a letter to Town Council drafted in May, 56 of the area's residents expressed concerns that "the Pratt Field complex is currently open to the public for recreation when not in use for college events, and our research has identified that the project will most likely result in the closing of this recreational area to public access."

Concerns from the neighborhood residents include a presumed increased crime and substance abuse from the site's tenants. Drawing from statistics based on Valley CDC's other SRO properties, the letter claimed that the Amherst site would yield 64 dispatch calls a year, with issues ranging from disturbances and criminal behavior to medical needs.

"A few of us are Amherst College professors, and we contacted college officials to determine what might happen if there are problematic incidents between the SRO and Amherst College students," the letter continued, outlining "problematic incidents" as encounters with and proximity to potential drug users. "The college responded that they would shut down the athletic fields to public access." The letter did not specify which officials were contacted. When asked in May, the college refused to offer public comments about the project, according to the Daily Hampshire Gazette.

Chief of Campus Operations Jim Brassord disputed the letter's contents. If the property is abused in any way, the college limits access to athletic fields. This procedure is longstanding, he said. He does not anticipate that the college will need to close the fields to the public.

Valley CDC also has a "solid record" of serving its tenants, Brassord noted." "The organization has strong relationships with community partners [like social workers and other community-based organizations] that provide the range of services to help their tenants succeed in their new circumstances," he said in an email interview. "While the Valley CDC properties serve low-income tenants who rely more on public services than the general population, it's not clear — as some community members have voiced concern — that low-income or near-homeless status necessarily translates to crime or substance abuse that is a public safety threat to the surrounding community."

"It should be also noted that this property will also potentially serve the needs of college staff who wish to live near the college but are unable to do so because of the lack of affordable housing," he added.

Several of the college's faculty members have signed on to the letter or submitted their own to the town council — signatories include Dean of New Students Rick Lopez, Professor of History Sean Redding, Chair of French Laura Katsaros, Chair of Art and the History of Art Samuel Morse, Professor of Physics William Loinaz, Visiting Professor of Classics Dale Sinos and Professor of Biology Jeeyon Jeong.

Chair of Classics Rebecca Sinos submitted her own letter in addition to signing onto the letter representing the 56 residents.

"Children come to the Amherst College fields regularly, sometimes from the childcare center that is just beyond the adjacent bike path, on Woodside, and sometimes just because people find these fields and their walkways a good place to push a stroller while another child toddles along," Sinos wrote. "And even if the college closes the fields and restricts entry to those affiliated with Amherst College, the college athletic events themselves attract families with children who should not be exposed to this potential hazard. Is it fair to expect Amherst College groundsmen to deal with needles on the Amherst fields as a regular part of their job?"

Katsaros wrote that while she supports low-income housing, Valley CDC should implement better supports for the site. "I wholeheartedly agree that the lack of affordable family housing in our town should be one of the key priorities of the town government," Katsaros said. "As you know, in the current project, a manager would be present on site 20 hours a week only; no medical, social or psychological support would be provided for the residents in the 10 allocated units who are transitioning from homelessness or the residents in the two units who are under the care of the Department of Mental Health. I believe providing more consistent on-site support for residents would be a good way to move forward."

Professor of History and American studies Frank Couvares submitted a letter to the town council in "strong support" of the project. "The track record of facilities like this for clients like [formerly homeless or housing secure persons] is very good," Couvares said. "Our town has long needed such a residential project, and I am very glad that the funding and a suitable site are available."

Baker isn't surprised, however, by the divides on the project. "What we find generally is that people love the idea of affordable housing, but they get pretty nervous if you're going to build it near them," Baker said.

Affordable Housing Dispute Prompts Student Outcry

Natalie De Rosa '21

Last week, The Student published an article on the new affordable housing project near Pratt Field — and its opposition from some Amherst College professors — consequently prompting a wide range of reactions. The article spurred open letters to the community and a public hearing by the Association of Amherst Students (AAS) on the issue.

In July, Amherst Town Council approved $500,000 of funding for a new affordable housing project at 132 Northampton Rd. Valley Community Development Corporation (Valley CDC), the developer of the unit, is a Northampton-based nonprofit that has erected similar projects across the Pioneer Valley. The site at 132 Northampton Rd. will house 28 "extremely low-income and near-homeless individuals" in single-room occupancy (SRO) residencies after construction begins in 2021, according to the Valley CDC.

In May, prior to the Town Council's decision, multiple professors and staff members signed on to a joint letter written by neighborhood residents that articulated concerns about a lack of support structures for the site's tenants as well as potential drug use. Though a few professors wrote letters to the council in support of the proposed project, faculty members also submitted their own letters expressing reservations about the proposed project.

After The Student reported on the letters on Nov. 13, the AAS sent an email to students on Nov. 17, noting that "in their actions as private citizens, professors do not speak on behalf of the student body." The email invited students to attend AAS's weekly meeting to share their thoughts during public comment. Students could also submit comments via an anonymous form or email the AAS.

AAS President Avery Farmer '20 said that AAS members agreed to discuss the issue to gauge campus climate. "AAS can't take a stand on the substance of what was said [in the letters]. We can't argue for or against affordable housing on behalf of the whole student body without doing some kind of outreach in seeing what the student body thinks first," Farmer said. "But what we can say is there was an implicit assumption in the way that the professors signed on to those letters ... that somehow Amherst students were part of the weight that was making up their arguments. If you're acting as a private citizen in a town matter, you can't really cite Amherst students as one of the reasons for your concern if the students themselves have not expressed some kind of concern about that."

Eliza Brewer '22, president of Questbridge, an organization for low-income students, opened public comment by drawing attention to low-income students' distrust after seeing the professors' stances on affordable housing.

"I do think that there are important conversations to be had about first-generation, low-income students here and how they're being advocated for," Brewer said. "Personally, as a president of a student organization and a resident counselor, I'm very nauseated by the fact that if a student comes to me and says, 'I'm having this problem and I need an advocate to help me,' I have to

think twice before I refer them to their dean or refer them to their professor."

Senator Ilyssa Forman '22 added that AAS's role in representing students — including low-income students — should encourage senators to act. "I want to echo that we are a representing body and that it is our job to act on behalf of what the students feel and think, and this is definitely within our jurisdiction," she said in the senate forum on Monday. "I just want to emphasize that on senate there are low-income people who hear you and feel you and who are on your side."

Ben Gilsdorf '21, another senator, encouraged the AAS to consider ways in which the organization could take action in response to the comments received. "One thing that I think that is really good is that they lost, that the people who were against this lost," Gilsdorf said, underscoring the fact that the Town Council still voted in favor of the development. "I think the best way to respond is to throw our whole support behind it." Gilsdorf also suggested writing letters to Valley CDC or hosting a public forum for members of the town and college community to continue dialogue on the issue.

After collecting students' comments, the AAS will determine the best method to address concerns. Possible actions include reaching out to involved professors, sending a letter to Valley CDC reflective of the student body's opinions or increasing funding for programs tailored to first-generation and low-income students. But exact next steps currently remain unclear. "We have to find a way to [take action] so it reflects our values and students' but also stays within the boundaries of what AAS purview is," Farmer said.

First-generation and low-income (FLI) student groups have also organized to write letters and opinion pieces in response to the professors' letters to town council. One group of about 30 students, led by Isiaha Price '21, met in Frost Cafe on Nov. 14 to brainstorm ways to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with the professors' opposition to the housing project. The group drafted a cover letter, set to publish on a to-be-decided date, so that students can submit personal stories relating to affordable housing.

In a draft of the cover letter, the group pushed back against the joint letter's correlation between drug use and poverty and noted the disparity between the college's promotion of its socioeconomic diversity and professors' impressions of the project's potential low-income tenants.

"We need look no further than the boundaries of Jenkins or the Triangle and the fact that 20 percent of Amherst College's student population is from the richest echelons of society to see that drugs have always been on this campus and it never had anything to do with poverty," the cover letter states. Jenkins Dormitory and the Triangle — a set of dorms comprised of Mayo-Smith Dormitory, Hitchcock Dormitory and Seelye Dormitory — are popular party locations at the college. The group plans to submit the compilation of stories to the professors listed in the joint letter so that they "can realize that sure, they have a legal right to petition ... but also understand that you're not voting against these nebulous abstract poor people. This could easily be any number of students and their families who may have been homeless themselves," Price said.

Another group of FLI students, led by Brewer, submitted an op-ed to The Student outlining similar concerns. The group's opinion piece criticizes the residents' letter for promoting the profiling of tenants and leveraging their occupations — ranging from professors to medical doctors to psychologists — to decide the fate of the tenants.

"I think that in terms of the professors who say that they stand with the school's mission, which part of that mission is ... upward mobility and helping students from first-generation, low-income backgrounds to excel and to be able to support themselves in the future ... I just think it's hypocritical for them to say they align with the school's mission," Brewer said. She added that the group hopes the professors who signed and wrote letters to Town Council will reconsider and reflect on their position. "We [evoke] a call to action to the professors and say, 'Look, we hope you sit with these words. We hope you educate yourselves,'" Brewer said. "We hope that you ask for grace because I think that will be given if you do. We're not meaning to attack anyone, but we are wanting to take a critical look at the roles that we play as people who are in positions of power."

Low-income students particularly expressed disappointment in Dean of New Students Rick Lopez — who has organized programming for FLI students, including summer bridge, a three-week pre-college program for incoming first years — in his decision to sign the joint letter from the residents.

"It's appalling to me that in public and in his role as a dean, he comes in and tells students every summer that they belong here, and then as a private citizen endorses something that pretty clearly says that they don't," Brewer said. Price added that he was upset "the dean that talked to me at [the summer science bridge program] and welcomed me to this school and gave me a speech about how being first-generation and low-income added to the experience of Amherst ... would then go sign that petition."

In emails obtained by The Student, Lopez said in an exchange with Brewer that the initial dissent against Valley CDC's project did not oppose affordable housing as a whole, but the use of SROs rather than family units. He stressed that the residents had hoped for increased on-site support for tenants with drug addictions.

According to Laura Baker, real estate project manager at Valley CDC, these concerns often contradict each other.

"Oftentimes people are asking us for competing things," she said. "It's impossible to do that because they conflict with each other. For example, folks who live nearby wanted to have more on-site support and more supervision of the property. So that drives increased operating costs. At the same time, they wanted less housing units there, which lowers the economic ability of the project to pay for staff."

In the email exchange with Brewer, Lopez wrote that "it is unfortunate that you might feel that you no longer can turn to me for support, because in this debate about the unit development my goal was to advocate for housing for homeless families and to create structures of support for them."

Outstanding concerns from FLI students in part instigated conversations about affordable housing in the AAS, according to Farmer. "I've been hearing a lot of reports of low-income and first-gen students ... feeling like the professors who signed on to the letter were effectively making some kind of statement of hostility towards that kind of housing. Their families might have lived in them at one point or people they know may have taken advantage of [affordable housing]," Farmer said.

Residents of Humphries House — a dorm informally known as the Zu that sits across the street from Pratt Field — also pushed back at professors' opposition to the housing project.

"We do not condone the classism implied in the concern over affordable housing in Amherst. We here at Zu live very close to the planned building and welcome new neighbors regardless of their incomes," the Zu residents wrote in a statement to The Student. "It's disturbing how quickly the conversation veered toward needles and halfway houses when there has been no mention of a drug rehabilitation center in the local coverage of the planned project. We ask those involved to remember that many Amherst students come from low-income households ... In an expensive area like Amherst where many people have to commute to work, access to affordable housing is long overdue."

Some students noted there is more nuance to the situation than what is seen at face value. While Michael Du '20 disagrees with the sentiments expressed in the professors' letters, he says he understands that the professors on the list signed on because "they want to preserve, for a lack of better words, the integrity of their community."

Samuel Melcher '22 said that the campus' reaction was harsher than needed to be. "I think the reaction of Amherst students has generally been unfair to the residents and professors. I've seen personal attacks against them online, especially against Professor Sinos. As people who live in the area, their concerns are both understandable and legitimate. And as students who do not live here, it is not our place to belittle their concerns," he said.

Several comments discussed at the AAS public hearing said that students' outrage is unprecedented. Comments presented in front of the AAS addressed concerns including students' approaches to criticizing professors who signed and submitted letters in opposition, potential drug abuse at the site and students' lack of recognition of their privilege when speaking on the issue.

Dear Amherst Faculty: An Open Letter about the Letter

Eliza Brewer '22, Yosef Ibrahim '23, Helen Knott '23 and Alexis Scalese '22

As students of Amherst College and members of the Amherst town community, we do not exist in a vacuum. Our actions have an effect on the greater community within the Town of Amherst. We, as a group of low-income student advocates, are of the opinion that our student body owes it to the non-student community to think about how we affect the lives of people outside of the college.

As an institution that benefits from high property taxes, the college and its community need to think critically about the people who have been physically and systematically displaced. In our opinion, the letter endorsed by neighbors and professors in the Amherst area is fraught with thinly veiled classism and an abuse of privilege. A number of places in the letter where we find a lack of self-education and an abundance of fear-mongering include:

1. *"Moreover, the Pratt Field complex is currently open to the public ... and our research has indicated that the project will most likely result in the closing of this recreational area to public access."*

This blatantly classist response to the situation, endorsed by some college faculty, is appalling and the fact that it is met with frightening submission instead of critical questioning on the part of the signees is doubly so. The assumptive power that has been asserted by certain members of Amherst College over this public facility is unjust and requires more examination on the part of the letter's signees.

2. *"Our group includes individuals with a diverse set of expertise relevant for the assessment of this proposal."*

The list of "diverse" individuals who were consulted include only people who were afforded the privileges of making lofty judgements about people in immediate distress. If people who represent the experience of someone in crisis were consulted, it was not mentioned in the letter.

3. *"No neighbor used these statistics to form and promulgate negative opinions of specific individuals, nor ever would we. Instead we use this valuable data ... to reach the conclusion that the Valley CDC's plan is inadequate, failing to provide around-the-clock support for this vulnerable population."*

This passage ignores the privilege held by many of the people on that list, claiming that because this project is in their backyard, they deserve special concessions, including an overnight supervisor for the complex.

This kind of watch might be necessary for individuals living in a prison or a halfway house, not people with agency who are paying their rent and living independent lives. These residents also don't consider the limited resources from which nearly all public housing nonprofits suffer. We are upset at the immediate impulse of college affiliates to reject rather than welcome. In the future, we hope these residents recognize that they have agency in the proper development of these initiatives through donations to Valley CDC and similar nonprofits.

4. *"This record of police activity at Valley CDC properties indicates that despite the screening processes by Valley CDC, many problems remain."*

We are shocked at the lack of consideration given to the role of profiling, which causes increased calling and policing around areas of low-income housing. We are saddened to believe that this is exactly what will happen when these new residents move in.

In conclusion, our goal as a group is not to reject or attack those who endorsed this letter. Instead, it is to invite the larger Amherst community to take a critical look at the roles we all play as people occupying positions of privilege in meeting needs and encouraging empathy across all types of barriers. According to the joint letter, it took 21 hours for the individuals who signed the petition to decide that 28 people in immediate need should not receive housing. We hope they will take longer than 21 hours to consider our concerns and carefully examine their actions.

A Response to Opposition on Affordable Housing

Colin Weinstein '22

As letters flowed in opposing a town proposal to allocate $500,000 toward the development of a single-room occupancy (SRO) affordable housing development at 132 Northampton Road, Amherst finally got its chance to take part in a time-honored national tradition: good ol' American NIMBY-ism (which stands for "Not In My Backyard" for those unacquainted with the acronym).

Luckily, Amherst is really making up for lost time, as the breadth of complaints so well demonstrates. In a few, we've seen the classic "Poor people are dangerous!" and "Think of the children!" arguments — insinuating that drug addiction and alcoholism would be rampant among future tenants. Some residents frame their NIMBY-ism not as personal concern, but rather as a selfless interest in "the good of the public," citing fears of lost access to Pratt Field due to improper (implied drug) use by the new residents.

To be fair, not all the complaints are so black or white. There are plenty of arguments which actually seem to posit useful critiques — for example, Professor of Economics and Environmental Studies Katherine Sims proposes using town funds more efficiently to maximize support for the project's beneficiaries. Still, even these critiques usually conclude that the project shouldn't continue at its current site or with its current intended occupancy.
Thus it's hard to determine whether these residents are genuinely seeking better housing options for vulnerable Amherst residents or are simply looking for justifications to move the development away from their own backyards.

However, whether these arguments amount to sincere critique or disguised aporophobia isn't my main concern. After all, who am I to assign intention to residents' words? Rather, I want to discuss some problems with one of the more salient complaints put forth: the letter sent to the Town Council by 56 residents from Amherst's Districts 3 and 4.

If you haven't read the letter, I'll provide a brief summary. Overall the residents take a defensive stance, emphasizing that they "are not saying 'not it our backyard,'" but rather 'please get this right, because it's our backyard.' Thus they land on the conclusion that the development doesn't necessarily need to be moved, but rather that Valley Community Development Corporation (Valley CDC), the developer and manager of the property, should pledge more professional support for residents — for their own benefit and the neighborhood's. They add briefly at the end of their letter that the development should also be reduced in size (perhaps a NIMBY concession?).

Fair enough. I'm all for allocating more resources to empower the homeless and treat addiction and mental illness. But who's to say this development won't

already provide enough resources — especially when Valley CDC has a proven track record of managing similar SRO developments (e.g. 82 Bridge St., Northampton)?

It's on this point that the letter takes a turn. Though the authors aren't literally saying "not in my backyard," they do justify their conclusions using some NIMBY arguments: worries about drug use and concern for "the public."

"Hmmm... That smells like profiling!," you might think. Well fear not, because according to the authors, "this is a wholly inaccurate description of the situation." They go on to tout their academic credentials and "rigorous use of data" as unassailable proof of their lack of bias. Moreover, they argue that their data prove the shortcomings of Valley CDC's management strategies.

Yes, I'd agree that arguments based on presentation of evidence generally don't count as profiling. I'd also say that the letter's argument lacks the "rigorous use of data" which the authors claim. This comes down to two examples, the first of which is worth a mention, and the second of which merits a full discussion.

In the first case, while the authors don't explicitly reference numbers, they do mention reading "surveys and scientific research detailing the expected rates of history of substance use disorders, the rates of relapse, and the statistics regarding social/behavioral outcomes given substance abuse." The implication is that these data (though not provided) support the authors' proposal and provides the reader with a baseline of knowledge on the effects of the proposed development. But considering the authors' argument, these data seem wholly irrelevant. They wouldn't actually make any claims about the sufficiency of Valley CDC's tenant services — just about the general population of people suffering from addiction. If the letter's argument is that Valley CDC's tenant services aren't sufficient, how would these data support that point?

Right off the bat, the evidence seems a bit dubious, but then we get to the authors' real data. Analyzing police calls made from other Valley CDC residences (four of which use the SRO model and one of which doesn't), the authors found that 2,669 calls were placed "over a period of several years." They placed these calls into five complaint categories of which "criminal" was the largest (22 percent of calls).

I'll discuss a number of issues with these data and their presentation, but there's one important point to make off the bat: calls to the police don't constitute crime.

It's pretty simple: police calls are complaints until the case is proven criminal. For example, I could call the police on any of the letter's signatories to complain about its contents; does that mean they committed a crime? No. If anything, these data simply show that people like to call the cops on the poor and the mentally ill. The authors, trying to reject accusations of profiling, define it using a classic example: "a law enforcement officer pulling over a vehicle simply because the driver is of a certain race." Ironically, they don't seem to realize that calling the cops on someone because you believe they committed a crime counts too. Despite the authors' claims of objectivity, their data might actually be the result of rampant profiling.

In all fairness to the authors, they do mention that John Hornik, chair of the Amherst Municipal Affordable Housing Trust Fund, had suggested they investigate call data. But that still doesn't justify basing their argument in unsupported data.

Let's say for a moment, however, that every call made to the police in these data reported a crime (or other emergencies/disturbances) that actually occurred. These data are still irrelevant to the case of 132 Northampton Road for a number of reasons. For one, the authors include non-SRO housing (specifically three-bedroom units) in the dataset, while the proposed development is exclusively SRO units. These two occupancy layouts are certainly not interchangeable, given the fundamental differences in social relations among tenants. Similarly, the developments in the dataset don't provide the same tenant services as the proposed one — most notably, a 20-hour per week on-site social worker. Generally, the data cited don't include cases comparable to the proposed development.

Let's give the letter another concession and say that the data do use comparable cases. Even then, the letter still presents the data in a misleading way. For example, the authors might throw out ostensibly high numbers of calls — such as 2,669 "over several years" and 2.07 to 3.06 "per resident per year" — but they don't provide a control for comparison. What's the average number of calls per resident per year throughout that neighborhood? In neighborhoods with similar demographics? For market-rate studio apartments, etc.? No comparison is given, and without comparison, these data don't actually lend to an argument about Valley CDC's management capability. For all we know, when put in context, that's a reasonable number of calls for those scenarios.

Still, let's be even more generous and give the letter that last concession, too. In total, we're assuming that calls to the police constitute actual incidents, that the data are comprised of developments comparable to the proposed CDC development and that the number of calls connected to these residences is inordinately high. Given all of these, the authors' presentation of the data still doesn't support their argument, because they don't indicate who is placing the calls. Why is this important? If neighbors were calling to complain about Valley CDC's tenants, that would support the letter's argument, because it shows how the tenants' actions might affect the neighborhood. On the other hand, if the calls originated from within the development, that doesn't do much for the argument that the tenants will have an adverse effect on the neighborhood; rather it exemplifies the need for services for tenants' sakes, not neighborhood residents.

My final concern with the residents' letter doesn't have to do with their data analysis; rather it concerns their lack of understanding of the project. While SRO housing often implies temporary housing for the homeless, 132 Northampton Road seeks to provide permanent housing to 10 formerly homeless tenants using project-based Section 8 vouchers (federally subsidized rent). These tenants won't be strangers in the neighborhood; they'll be neighbors. They, just as much as the writers of the letter, will have a stake in the community.

Moreover, for all the authors' concerns about mentally ill tenants, only two units are allocated for residents with mental illness. And what about the 16 remaining

units? They're reserved for tenants earning 50 percent and 80 percent of area median income who are not using rental vouchers. Thus the majority of units are allocated to tenants who aren't homeless and don't have severe mental illness; they simply don't make as much money as professors. Given this tenant makeup, some of the fears expressed in the letter seem a bit unfounded.

All of this isn't to say that Valley CDC's plan is perfect; there are useful critiques made, and for all I know, insufficient tenant services could end up being one of them. What frustrates me is the way the authors of this letter tout their academic credentials and "scientific analyses" as absolution from bias while providing a botched analysis of data. In the end, while the use of these data to advocate for more tenant services isn't inherently problematic, it still obstructs funding for the project without proving any issues with it as is. If this isn't the quintessence of the bubble of academia, I don't know what is.

My goal here isn't just to lambast some academics for what looks like NIMBY-ism. I'd much rather assume that they really do care about the success of this development and its tenants. If they really care about success, the residents' goal shouldn't be to defund the project before it even starts. Rather, they should actively contribute to the success of the project. Get to know the new tenants! If they're having issues, help them out instead of calling the cops! Volunteer your time and money! Be a neighbor to your neighbors. After all, this is their backyard, too.

OPINION

Ideals Beyond the Brochure

By The Editorial Board || Issue 149-11

Last Wednesday, on Nov. 13, The Student published a story about the Valley Community Development Corporation's plan to build 28 affordable housing units at 132 Northampton Road. The Town of Amherst has identified the project as long overdue, investing $500,000 into the complex in July. Despite the necessity of affordable housing, the venture received resistance from town residents. A letter endorsed by 56 Amherst residents, 15 of whom work at Amherst College, called for a delay of the proposed affordable units.

The opposition by faculty and other community members prompted responses from the student body, especially considering the relatively significant population of low-income students here at the college. A 2017 study from The New York Times estimated that about 4.7 percent of Amherst students come from the bottom 20 percent of

MEET THEAUTHOR

The Editorial Board

TOP ARTICLES

Life(-giving) Sentences: Movement Through Intimacy
by Seoyeon Kim '21

Netflix's "Unbelievable" Portrays Effects of Rape in New Way
by Olivia Luntz '21 and Paige Reddington '21

Views from Sparrow's Nest:

income brackets, one of the highest percentages in the NESCAC. Moreover, according to the college's website, Amherst offered over $56 million in financial aid to about 57 percent of the student body last year.

Thus over the past week, the campus community has engaged in a dialogue about college affiliates' obligation to represent the values typically attached to the college.

A follow-up letter from the Chair of Classics Rebecca Sinos provided a concrete dispute. She wrote, "The optimism that holds that no residents of the CDC residence would resort to substance abuse seems to me ill-considered and all-together unpersuasive." She argued that the presence of needles from drug use near/on Amherst's Pratt Field would pose a threat to the safety of residents. The Amherst Muckrake, a publication dedicated to college-specific satire, offered one interpretation of Sinos' dissent in a post: "'Anyone Who Needs Low-Income Housing is a Heroin Addict" Claims Classics Professor at College With Radically Progressive Financial Aid Program." The post spurred conversations about the hypocrisy of the situation

Colin Kaepernick
by Matthew Sparrow '21

Affordable Housing Dispute Prompts Student Outcry
by Natalie De Rosa '21

Possible Racist Incident in Cohan Under Investigation
by Shawna Chen '20

but also about the issue with denouncing someone who shared her opinion as a private citizen.

Just six days before The Student's article was released, The New York Times wrote a feature on Amherst's efforts to diversify its athletics program. The piece detailed the college's efforts to attract underrepresented groups, including the Diversity Open House weekend during which the school provides an all-expenses-paid trip to over 100 prospective underrepresented minority students so they can experience Amherst firsthand. The article quotes President Biddy Martin saying, "What matters more than money to travel is the effort, the awareness and the commitment to diversity." Coming from the president, this sentiment reflects a general ideal of the college, one sold to prospective families on the college's website and other admissions materials.

The college's outward commitment to diversity is thus no secret. However, what is the duty of its employees in upholding these values in their own lives? Contractually and legally, there is none. But morally, there is some. The faculty of the college makes implicit contributions to the culture of the school — which decides whether or not our values

become actualized. If professors show up to work expected to make decisions with inclusion in mind but go home and advocate to keep their neighborhood homogenous, then an undeniable tension arises.

This does not mean that the faculty who signed this letter deserve to be demonized for their views. Human beings are inherently prone to contradiction. It is unrealistic to assume that people will practice what they preach 100 percent of the time. However, this human tendency simply explains; it does not excuse. When we find ourselves in an instance of hypocrisy, which is inevitable for anyone, it is necessary to face it.

This Editorial Board understands that the actions of Amherst College affiliates as private citizens should not be under relentless scrutiny — they deserve a work-home divide. But it is necessary to acknowledge that their actions at home do have an impact on the culture of the school. For students from low-income backgrounds, being taught by professors whom they now know might not want them as their neighbor creates a rift that ultimately impacts students' relationships with their professors. It is only one of many consequences.

So what are the next steps? First, the college faculty who opposed the Valley CDC project engage in the current dialogue with the student body. As much as Amherst College advocates for socioeconomic diversity, it also champions diversity of opinion. No perspective should be demonized without the opportunity for explanation. Thus, these faculty members should explain their positions more openly and work to reconcile them with the values they are expected to subscribe to in their workplace. Secondly, they should try to make amends with students who have been hurt by their actions. It is critical that these professors do not let socioeconomic disparities on campus turn into harmful social divides.

Finally, the Editorial Board recommends that the relevant faculty consider changing their minds. Even though the town's funding proposal ultimately passed, the pushback makes it harder for Valley CDC to diversify the socioeconomic landscape of Amherst. We can talk about the contradiction of these faculty members' stance with the Amherst College admissions brochure, but at the end of the day, these 15 votes of resistance pose real obstacles to getting people off the streets and helping them

exit the vicious cycle of systemic poverty.

Conversation is a good first step, but it doesn't tangibly do much for people who are not sure where they are going to sleep or eat for dinner. It's cold enough outside — let's not give homeless and low-income people the cold shoulder, too.

Unsigned editorials represent the Editorial Board (assenting: 12; dissenting: 0; abstaining: 1)

The Amherst Student Comment Policy

We welcome all relevant, and respectful comments. Irrelevar comments will be deleted.

Comments **Community** 1

Recommend Tweet Share **Sort b**

Start the discussion…

LOG IN WITH

OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS ?

Name

Be the first to comment.

OPINION

Risk and Reward

By Holden Lee '22 || Issue 149-11

Everything comes with a price. Most of us have learned this lesson in one way or another. To gain one thing is to sacrifice another. In the case of Valley Community Development Corporation's (Valley CDC) affordable housing project, the price of building such a complex takes a certain amount of risk.

As Chair of Classics Rebecca Sinos' letter to the Town Council argues, establishing this housing unit has the real possibility of harm — in the form of used hypodermic needles in the Amherst College fields — which can pose a very real threat to anyone who stumbles upon them, especially children.

Let's not mince words over whether Professor Sinos says all low-income or homeless people are drug addicts. That's not what she writes in her letter. Her point is that an opioid-using population exists and

MEET THEAUTHOR

Holden Lee '22

TOP ARTICLES

Life(-giving) Sentences: Movement Through Intimacy
by Seoyeon Kim '21

Netflix's "Unbelievable" Portrays Effects of Rape in New Way
by Olivia Luntz '21 and Paige Reddington '21

Views from Sparrow's Nest:

that a housing unit near the fields means it is possible a part of that population will occupy a part of the unit and bring needles with them. Sinos deals in possibilities, not absolutes, nor does she make any sweeping generalizations.

At the same time, Professor Sinos' argument is not the most compelling. Her letter is largely rooted in her own experiences and anecdotal argument, with little hard evidence to back up her claims. However, the fact that her case is certainly lacking is itself a separate issue. More important is her perception of the possibility of danger.

This is what defines risk. After all, "taking a risk" doesn't mean you are guaranteed any kind of harm; it only means that harm appears possible or likely.

A certain degree of risk comes with investing in and building such a housing project. Sinos has determined that there exists a risk associated with the housing project, and that this risk is not worthwhile.

While her stance is unfortunate, looking for the potential drawbacks of the Valley CDC project is wise. However, the brief analysis in her letter to the

Colin Kaepernick
by Matthew Sparrow '21

Affordable Housing Dispute Prompts Student Outcry
by Natalie De Rosa '21

Possible Racist Incident in Cohan Under Investigation
by Shawna Chen '20

Amherst Town Council is woefully incomplete: Sinos speaks only to the potential for harm and fails to acknowledge the equally real potential for good.

Within our communities, the value of actions should be measured based on the good they can achieve for society — especially for those in need. We should seek to take action because it may do good, rather than refraining from taking action simply because it may bring harm. We should be willing and prepared to accept risks for the sake of more vulnerable populations in our communities.

If we are unwilling to invest in providing such support, then the only remaining option is to stop pretending as though we actually care about our community. And, naturally, if any among us don't care about the community, then those individuals have no business involving themselves in community affairs.

At the same time, there is a limit to how much risk is acceptable. How much is too much? What price is reasonable? Recklessly ignoring or denying the potential risks of a new endeavor is just as shortsighted as refusing to take action solely because of risk. An assessment of the consequences

of action demands a discussion of whether the good consequences outweigh the bad, or vice versa.

While it is somewhat regrettable that Sinos has chosen such a narrow position on this issue, her opinion absolutely has value — she was bold enough to acknowledge a point that many would be unwilling to address.

We should all be careful to avoid crass ad hominem attacks on Professor Sinos, regardless of whether her concerns are substantiated or not. To deride her character as a poor-hating monster is unnecessary and unproductive. Instead, her letter should be taken as a starting point for a greater conversation about the merits and repercussions of Valley CDC's plan.

Fallout From Affordable Housing Dispute Leads President Martin, AAS to Weigh in

Shawna Chen '20

Fallout from the affordable housing controversy continued through Thanksgiving break, with President Biddy Martin sending an email on the low-income housing project at the center of the debate to a group of students who identify as first-generation and low-income (FLI).

Backlash on campus began after The Student published an article on Nov. 13 that revealed details of a joint letter signed by 56 neighborhood residents — including numerous professors — opposing the development of a single-room occupancy low-income housing unit across the street from Pratt Field. The planned project, located at 132 Northampton Rd., underwent public comment in July before the Town Council voted to fund it.

Reaction to The Student's report about the professors' signatures was swift, with FLI student organizations mobilizing and The Amherst Muck-Rake, a satirical online publication, posting about the letter. Four days after the article's publication, the Association of Amherst Students (AAS) sent an email to the student body distancing itself from the professors' position.

Martin entered the fray on Nov. 21, when a group of students received an email from Casey Jo Dufresne, the program director of the Meiklejohn Fellows program, which offers workshops, internship funding and other resources for FLI students.

In the letter, Martin expressed the college's support for the housing project and "what the project seeks to accomplish." She wrote that the college has been in communication with the executive director and project manager of the Valley Community Development Corporation (Valley CDC) — the developer of the housing project — and that the college had compiled information about the project to send to neighbors who contacted the college with their concerns.

"I understand why many members of our community have found some of the now public comments in resistance to the project to be surprising and upsetting and I feel badly that some of the comments that emerged in town discussions have had that impact," Martin wrote.

Dufresne's addendum to Martin's letter stated that Martin had reached out to her with the message and encouraged students to contact Dufresne if they needed support.

Isiaha Price '21, an AAS senator who was one of the first to publicly speak out against the joint letter, said he didn't know Martin's email had been sent only to students who identify as FLI until he talked to other students and realized they

hadn't received the email.

"When I was just reading it myself, I was like, 'I'm happy,'" Price said. "It was an important sentiment: just because you have some head administrators and powerful faculty on this petition doesn't mean it's the official stance of the school. That was important for me; I liked hearing that."

The nature of the letter's delivery, however, made Price feel "a little bit weird." The FLI community may be the group most affected by the professors' opposition, but "we're also the group that already knows this should be supported," he said. He'd hoped for a community-wide email affirming support for low-income students and low-income people in the town of Amherst.

Helen Knott '23, who identifies as FLI, said Martin's email was both appreciated and "a little bit distancing" because of its delivery through Dufresne. The letter also seemed like a "political move," Knott said.

"She made it sound like the institution believed in the affordable housing project and that these professors and staff were just lone wolves doing their own thing, basically throwing them under the bus," Knott said. "And while I don't particularly have a problem with that, ... I don't know how disingenuous it might be."

When admitted to the college, Knott was "100 percent sold" on the idea that she deserved her place and that low-income students like her were welcome and wanted. With this new academic degree, she'd make her way in the world — it would be her chance at a new life, she thought. "Getting hit with the 'you were chosen because of optics' — that hurts," Knott said, referring to the professors' letters. Now, she doesn't know how much faith to put into Martin's message.

In a separate interview with The Student, Martin said she reached out to Dufresne and Tenzin Kunor, director of the Center for Diversity and Student Leadership, after she heard FLI students were offended by some of the commentary. She was concerned for the students who felt directly implicated but didn't have an email list, so she asked Dufresne and Kunor to pass along her message. The college, according to Martin, has been holding informational meetings with Valley CDC since May.

Eliza Brewer '21, president of Questbridge, an organization for FLI students, said she was glad Martin reached out. "It's more than I expected from her, but I do wish it had been sent to the entire community," Brewer said. "By sending it out only to FLI students, she's sort of making this into a FLI students issue. That's not the conversation.This is very much a confirmation of what we already know, which is that a lot of the staff and faculty here are quite classist and just don't understand FLI issues. If they're going to be teaching us, they need to understand that these people that they're talking about are their students. And that's one discussion that for sure needs to be had, but not the big discussion I think that needs to be found or the only discussion needs to be had."

The bigger discussion that needs to be had, she said, is that Amherst is "failing its most vulnerable population."

"As people of privilege, I think it is our responsibility to have those conversations and not just live in our own little bubble of Amherst students," she said. "And I think by sending that email to FLI students only, [Martin] restricts the conversation only to: 'Oh, this is a FLI student issue,' which it's not. Our greater community is suffering. It's not receiving the sort of aid it needs and it's continuously coming up against these obstacles — elitism and classism and just like failures of justice in so many senses."

After hearing from students at a senate meeting, the AAS sent a second email to the student body on Nov. 20, writing that "while the AAS acknowledges these professors' fundamental right to express themselves and their opinions, we believe that many of their comments and those comments' implications are not only problematic and contrary to Amherst College's mission, but also deeply harmful to many members of our community."

Affirming Valley CDC's work, the AAS addressed low-income students, emphasizing that the AAS hears their concerns, recognizes the challenges they face at Amherst and will "do everything in our power to advocate" for them. The letter ended with a request that the faculty who wrote in opposition consider the impact of their words.

"We ask that you think about the power imbalance in your classrooms, and how low-income students must feel to know that their professors have insinuated that people like them don't belong in this neighborhood," the email stated.

A Sense of Misunderstanding

Across the student body, one of the most surprising signatories of the joint letter was Dean of New Students Rick Lopez, who is also the chair of Latinx and Latin American Studies (LLAS).

Lopez was one of Knott's first friendly faces at Amherst. During Summer Bridge, a three-week program dedicated to helping first-year FLI students navigate the college, Lopez was one of the people who "sold me on the idea that I deserve to be here, I am valued as a person, my background and identities are valued."

Now, maybe Lopez shouldn't be the one talking to first-year students about being first-gen low-income, Knott said. "I don't mind if he's still tenured or if he still has a position, [as long as] he moves on to somewhere else so he doesn't have as much power," she added. "If I need any sort of help, that oftentimes can be like, 'I'm low on money and I need help getting some money from financial aid. Could you help me with this?' And for accommodations: 'Because I'm poor, I didn't have this, so I'll need it.'" Now that her trust in Lopez has been broken, she said she is unsure she can rely on him.

On Nov. 20, LLAS majors received an email from Lopez in which he referenced his experience growing up poor in a "minority and low-income neighborhood."

"I have seen, from close up, low-income housing models that work well for the people who live in them, and models that do not work as well," he wrote. "In the conversations regarding the development on Northampton Road, I sought an open conversation in the planning phase, but when it became clear that the developer was not open to a conversation about the details of the model they

were using, and given some of my concerns, I agreed to sign the letter asking the Town Council not to approve the specific proposal."

Despite his opposition to the project, he wrote, he became "committed to the success of the project" after the Town Council approved its development. He took issue with his neighbors' choice to "use certain statistics" in the joint letter but noted that "the letter sought to address the input of more than 50 individuals, so it falls short for any of us."

At the time that the letter was being written and signed, he added, he was in El Paso, Texas trying to help his sister, who is disabled, out of her current lease so she could move near their parents. "I did not have the time or energy in that context to get involved in the details of the letter," Lopez wrote. "I figured that the inclusion of the text stating that the signers were not uniform in our views and that our main goal was to get the project right were sufficient to signal heterogeneity in perspective."

In a separate interview with The Student, Lopez referred to a low-income housing complex in his neighborhood during his childhood that through its design isolated its residents and led to violence and drug dealing. Other people in his neighborhood who also lived in low-income housing didn't experience the same kind of unhappiness, he said. After many years, the complex was declared a disaster. When it was rebuilt about a decade ago, its residents no longer felt unsafe or unsupported.

Lopez pointed to this example as the reason he signed the joint letter, noting that his opposition was to the proposal and not the creation of the unit itself. The housing unit on Northampton Road will offer single-room occupancy residencies, which Lopez said will be a "tower of isolation."

"What people were wondering was why not make it mixed [housing]? Why not make it have on-site support?" Lopez said, adding that he was invested in incorporating permeability and community-building into the conceptualization of the project. "There were no channels for people to feel integrated into the neighborhood ... And to not offer robust support to help residents succeed requires a conversation." He did not agree with the joint letter's use of the call data, however, which cited calls to the police at Valley CDC's Northampton low-income housing sites evidence the Amherst project would be poorly managed.

The residents wanted to vote down the proposal of that version of the model, Lopez said, not the project itself. After the town voted to fund it, "everyone moved on and committed to making it a success."

The ongoing backlash from the college community is not his concern, however.

"The fallout of this misunderstanding — I wouldn't want this to make the students I'm committed to serving hesitate to reach out for support," he said. He has been reaching out to individual students to meet and talk in person about the controversy.

Moving Forward

After the The Student's initial article was published, Brewer contacted Lopez and

engaged in conversation about his signature on the letter. They reached a mutual understanding, she said.

"I still don't really agree with his methods, ... but the one thing that we both agreed on very strongly was that, especially in a low-income community, it can be hard for students to find champions," Brewer said. "We're very good at self-advocacy, and so when someone says they're going to be an advocate for us, we take that very seriously and we keep them accountable. Our fear was that this would be seen as a betrayal for a lot of students, so they wouldn't seek out resources in the future. And that's something that neither of us wanted."

Whether or not FLI students seek out Lopez doesn't matter to him or Brewer, she said, "just that they do seek someone out." She noted that Lopez has received numerous emails from people calling him a racist and classist, but she disagrees, saying instead that he made a decision with "poor judgment."

"I think that he should ask for grace, ... but I don't believe that he is deserving of all the hate that's coming his way," Brewer said.

She is planning a collaboration with FLI students at UMass Amherst to find ways to support low-income people in the Amherst area.

Professor of History Frank Couvares, one of the faculty members who submitted a letter in support of the project in July, defended his colleagues in an interview with The Student, emphasizing that people can have "honest disagreements about this" and that he didn't think the opposing professors have been "threatening or insensitive to low-income students."

Nobody should be demonized, he said, especially when the dialogue was "well within ordinary discourse, occasionally elevated in emotion." Couvares himself maintained his continued support for the project and noted that "we need to see this project built."
Chair of Classics Rebecca Sinos, who submitted a letter to the Town Council asking if it's "fair to expect Amherst College groundsmen to deal with needles on the Amherst fields," declined to comment for the article. Price, however, said she needs to be held accountable for her words.

"When your opinions are attacking someone, that deserves to be talked about," he said. "I feel like it fell on low-income students to have to defend ourselves when we shouldn't have had to defend this sort of rhetoric, because it should have been instantaneous from the college and from other people: you get to have opinions on topics but you don't get to have opinions against people's existence."

Growing up, Knott had long felt that her middle and high school administrators didn't care about her as a person who was poor and had home life issues. "You don't really enjoy it but you get used to it," Knott said. "But it hurts just a little more that I have to get used to it now that I'm here because I really did hope that things would be a lot better on this campus. I don't have to worry about whether or not I'll eat because I know there's always going to be food for me, or whether or not the lights will stay on or whether or not I go homeless."

It's a bit saddening, she said, to realize she will still have to play the "political

game" of making sure she makes a big enough fuss to get her problems solved, but not enough that she has to deal with potential ramifications.
"It's a systematic problem," she said with a sigh.

Faculty and the Affordable Housing Project

Elizabeth Aries and Allen Hart

Many students are extremely upset about the views expressed by some professors about the likely occupants of the affordable housing project at 132 Northampton Rd., as first reported in The Student on Nov. 13.

The linked letters submitted to the Town Council represent the voices of a small number of faculty members who, except for one, opposed the affordable housing project. These voices were upsetting and harmful to low-income students' sense of belonging and respect in our campus community.

Not surprisingly, many low-income students have felt demeaned by the assumptions made about the occupants, people with whom they identify.

Regardless of the intentions of the signatories, students have taken these assumptions personally as an indication of how they might also be viewed by the faculty of this college. It was easy for them to quickly conclude that they, too, may be seen as "other," as "them" and not as "us."

When asked by our class, "What do other faculty think?" we were embarrassed to admit that outside of faculty meetings, there are no structures in place for faculty to regularly have important conversations about issues that we as a community face, and so we could only speculate.

The full faculty has not met since this story came out and is unlikely to meet before the semester ends, but we have spoken informally with many members of the faculty who want students to know that the views expressed in letters to the Town Council are not representative of their views.

If the college is committed to ensuring that every student here feels included, then clearly we have much more work to do. Individually, we must think more deeply about the beliefs we may unwittingly carry and how those beliefs may be harming others. Even if the "controversy" over the housing project "blows over" there has been harm done that needs repair.

Among the many things that this situation has revealed about the community is that students are longing for and need to hear the voices of more faculty.

We need to create opportunities for dialogue among and between students and faculty before the semester ends. We hope that other faculty members will add their voices to the conversation.