

Habitat project takes a step forward

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN

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Housing organization's effort to build in Grafton buoyed by commission's decision to change land-use map

Habitat for Humanity's plan to build a residential project in Grafton received a positive reception from village officials Tuesday when the Plan Commission recommended changing a land-use map to accommodate the development.

The commission's unanimous decision — which calls for rezoning a vacant, one-acre parcel west of the Sendik's Food Market on First Avenue from commercial to medium-density residential use in the village's 2035 master plan — was made despite protests from several residents who live near the site.

Habitat's Lakeside Ozaukee Chapter has proposed building three residential units, including a duplex and a single-family house, on a wooded parcel currently in the Town of Cedarburg off the north side of Columbia Road.

For the project to become a reality, the village must still annex the land, rezone it for planned unit development and approve site and building plans.

During a public hearing on the land-use map change, neighboring residents voiced opposition to the project, which they said was too large for the parcel, would cause stormwater runoff problems and a loss of trees and diminish their property values.

"It's too narrow, too dense for three living areas," said one of several residents of the nearby Pine Ridge Condominiums who spoke against the plan. "With the amount of trees that have to be removed, there would be more erosion."

Residents also questioned why residents would want to live in houses facing a busy delivery road to Sendik's, an anchor business in the village's south commercial district.

Alan Schupp, president of Habitat's local chapter, said his organization has tried for several years to develop an acceptable project for the parcel. Those efforts have included working with the village's planning staff to move the building locations to the east side of the property due to wetlands and a drainage swale on the west side.

After reviewing the project, the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources has given the site plan preliminary approval.

Because Habitat builds houses for low-income families, the units must be affordable to meet the organization's mission, Schupp noted. The difficulty of acquiring affordable local land has limited Habitat to four parcels in Ozaukee County, all in Port Washington, he added.

"The land is appraised at \$60,000. We can't build less than three units for it to be affordable," Schupp said.

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“We are committed to building decent homes for working families. We’re trying to do something we can be proud of.”

Schupp said the project has received support from other local residents, including a group of Grafton clergy.

Pending final approval from the village, Schupp said, Habitat plans to break ground for the duplex in late spring or early summer 2013 and construct the single-family house in 2015.

Village President Jim Brunnquell, chairman of the Plan Commission, said he appreciated the residents’ concerns but has visited the parcel and believes it is suitable for a Habitat project. Amending the land-use map would allow the village to use the site as a transition between commercial and residential areas.

“Habitat has worked with the village and the planning department to develop something for that site,” Brunnquell said. “This is a chance to make this a better transitional area. It also helps fill a community need to provide economical housing.

“What Habitat has brought to the village is a very quality project.”

Several commission members also voiced support for the project.

“I understand what you’re saying,” member Carl Harms told the residents. “But I wouldn’t want to see commercial development there (instead of residential).”

In response to residents’ concerns about three family units being too dense for the parcel, Village Planning Director Mike Rambousek said the density was less than the Pine Ridge Condominiums, which have six or seven units per acre.

“In terms of transition, this seems like the perfect fit,” Rambousek said.

Tuesday’s vote represents a breakthrough for Habitat, which has tried for years to build on the parcel. The organization’s previous plans were rejected by the village due to concerns with density, setbacks and zoning issues.

In August, the commission gave a favorable review of a conceptual plan for the project that called for two buildings with three residential units.

The commission also held a public hearing Tuesday on Habitat’s request to rezone the land from agricultural use, its current designation, to planned unit development, which would become the zoning if the property is annexed to the village.

The commission is scheduled to make recommendations on the annexation and rezoning requests Jan. 24.

After approving the land-use map change, the Village Board is expected to take final action on

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the other requests Feb. 18.

In response to a request from condominium owners, Rambousek and Schupp said they would be willing to meet with residents to discuss the project further.