

Churches push village to OK Habitat project

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Local pastors urge Grafton board to approve group's long-delayed plan for affordable housing on south-side parcel

Citing a need for more affordable housing locally, a group of Grafton churches is urging Grafton officials to allow Habitat for Humanity to build a residential project in the village.

In a letter sent to Ozaukee Press and addressed to the Village Board, representatives of four parishes asked board members to approve Habitat's plan to construct three single-family units on a one-acre parcel near the Sendik's Food Store on Grafton's south side.

Ozaukee County Habitat has tried several times since 2004 to build homes at the site, altering plans in response to village concerns, but failed to receive approval.

"Hundreds of people in our congregations and beyond believe deeply in Habitat for Humanity. It is time for Grafton to embrace this project, and all its positive effects," the letter states.

The letter is signed by four pastors — Paul Bulgerin and Heidi Borkenhagen of Grace Lutheran Church, Pat Mulcahy of Vineyard Community Church and Franz Rigert of Pilgrim United Church of Christ — and Brenda Cline, parish director of St. Joseph Catholic Church.

The letter states that Habitat officials have worked with the village for seven years, only to have their plan rejected "based on one technicality or another."

Besides providing affordable housing, the project would allow the village to add developed land to its tax base, the letter states.

Rigert said the letter was co-written by church leaders in an effort to resurrect the project.

"We're hoping to create enough political pressure to get something going," he said. "We don't want the letter to come off as ill-spirited, but we believe it's time to get something done. The Village Board has the power to make this happen."

Through Habitat, qualified families receive an interest-free mortgage to buy a home but must work alongside volunteers and contribute 500 hours to the completion of their residence.

In 2004, the organization first proposed building a duplex on the parcel, which is west of First Avenue and north of Columbia Road in the Town of Cedarburg and is owned by the organization. The project underwent several changes before an annexation request sent to the Village Board fell one vote short of approval.

In opposing the request, several board members cited their desire to conform to a village moratorium on multifamily housing.

Habitat's most recent plan, offered last fall, calls for three single-family residences on the land,

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which is assessed at \$60,000. At least three homes are required to keep them affordable for Habitat families, said John Orth, director of the organization's Ozaukee chapter.

Orth said Habitat has worked with the village planning department on numerous revisions but has been told the project wouldn't meet zoning and setback requirements. He said Village President Jim Brunnquell has blocked efforts to have the project presented to the Plan Commission, on which Brunnquell serves as chairman.

However, Brunnquell denied that claim, saying village officials are willing to reconsider the project if several problems can be resolved, including zoning, setback and wetlands issues.

"Anybody can apply to be on a Plan Commission agenda," Brunnquell said.

"We're more than happy to have the Plan Commission and Village Board look at these kinds of projects, but as it stands, this would not meet village zoning requirements."

Brunnquell said he could support construction of a triplex, which the Village Board might approve as an exception to the multifamily moratorium, rather than separate housing units.

"If we change our zoning code to allow that, we have to consider how that would affect the rest of the village," he said.

Added Brunnquell: "I think everyone would agree that Habitat is very worthwhile organization with a worthwhile mission. We are still willing to work with them."

Village Administrator Darrell Hofland said the next step is up to Habitat officials. If they present another proposal, it will again be referred to the Plan Commission and planning department as part of the review process, he noted.

"My reaction is that the Plan Commission and Village Board members have not disputed the need for affordable housing in Grafton, but there are other issues," Hofland said.

Orth expressed doubt that Habitat would return to the village with a new proposal in the near future. Instead, he said, local chapter members have focused on their latest Ozaukee County project — building three houses in Port Washington, where Habitat has already completed homes for seven families.

"I'm not holding my breath," Orth said of the Grafton project. "We would need some indication that they're willing to work with us on an affordable plan.

"We would like to be in Grafton because we have the support of residents and clergy, but we don't have the support of the village officials."

Rigert said he and other Habitat supporters aren't about to give up on the Grafton project. "We will continue to advocate for Habitat by inviting the members of our congregations to express their support for this project as well," the letter states.

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