Organization, supporters meet with Grafton officials to consider compromise for rebuffed housing project

Sparked by a reinvigorated sense of community support, local officials are trying to breathe new life into Habitat for Humanity's effort to build a residential project in the Village of Grafton.

In recent weeks, Habitat representatives have met with the village's planning staff to discuss options for constructing three family units on a one-acre parcel near the Sendik's Food Store on Grafton's south side.

Since Habitat's Ozaukee County chapter first proposed building homes at the site in 2004, the project has failed several times to win village approval. That could change if the recent discussions result in a plan that meets Habitat's needs and addresses the village's concerns, according to Village Administrator Darrell Hofland.

"There have been several constructive conversations and meetings, and the village anticipates a formal proposal to be submitted in the near future," Hofland said.

Habitat's latest plan calls for three single-family residences to be built on the wooded parcel, which is west of First Avenue and north of Columbia Road in the Town of Cedarburg. Habitat officials said at least three homes are needed to keep them affordable for families, who receive an interest-free mortgage but must work alongside volunteers and contribute 500 hours of hands-on work to the completion of their residence.

But several Grafton officials, including Village President Jim Brunnquell, have said the project would not meet village zoning and setback requirements.

Brunnquell said allowing three single-family homes to be built on the parcel would require a new form of zoning. He favors construction of a triplex, with all three residences in one building.

Alan Schupp, president of Habitat's Ozaukee chapter, said he is optimistic about a compromise but cautioned that the project faces a variety of hurdles. Besides zoning concerns, there are issues with wetlands that will require approval from the Department of Natural Resources, he noted.

"At least we're in a discussion, which is helpful," Schupp said. "We're trying to reach a compromise where the village is satisfied but also where we can build three separate units over several years. We cannot build three units at one time."

Resolving the wetlands concern could provide more flexibility in setback requirements for the project, according to Schupp. "The village wants us to build on the south side, close to Highway 57, and our preference is to build on the north end because of the wetlands issue," he said.

Renewed talks about the project began after a group of Grafton churches wrote a letter urging

the Village Board to approve Habitat's plan for three single-family units.

The letter, which was signed by pastors from Grace Lutheran Church and Pilgrim United Church of Christ and the parish director of St. Joseph Catholic Church, stated that the project would help fill a need for affordable housing and contribute to the village's tax base.

Franz Rigert, pastor of Pilgrim Church, said he was encouraged by a recent meeting he and Schupp had with Village Planning Director Mike Rambousek.

"We talked about a new concept that we think can work," Rigert said. "It would be kind of a hybrid of what Habitat has proposed and what the village wants."

Schupp said Habitat officials are willing to change their plan to address village concerns but only if the project allows the organization to fulfill its mission of providing affordable homes. Habitat officials are also reluctant to spend time and money on project plans without some assurance from the village that the effort would be worthwhile.

"This should be a project that would benefit the village, benefit Habitat and certainly benefit the families," Schupp said.

Habitat members have been frustrated by the inability to build homes in Grafton, especially when another nearby community, the City of Port Washington, has approved several of the organization's projects. Habitat has completed homes for seven Port families and is building three more there.

"Grafton has found ways to approve a lot of development projects, including a multimillion-dollar hospital," Schupp said.

"You would think they could find a way to approve a plan for three small houses on a lot that nobody else wants."