

Zoning Board OKs housing authority development

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STAMFORD -- The city's housing authority, Charter Oak Communities, has received preliminary zoning approval for its plans to build mixed-income housing on the West Side as part of an effort to tear down and replace the aging Vidal Court housing complex.

The development is to consist of 45 rental units spread across 10 two-and three-story buildings along a roughly 3-acre stretch of Merrell Avenue. Of those units, 27 are to be affordable, while 18 would be rented at market rates. The agency also plans to rehabilitate four single-family houses and building a fifth one on Broad Street, all of which would be made rented at market rates.

On Monday night, zoning board members unanimously approved the general development plan, which provides the city with a template of where building is to occur. Charter Oak has indicated that it needed approval of the general development plan this month so as to be able to apply for tax credits that would provide financing for the roughly \$15 million project.

Officials said final plans could be submitted to the city as early as next summer.

The Merrell Avenue and Broad Street plan represents the third phase of Charter Oak's redevelopment on the West Side. Another yet-to-be introduced phase is expected on Stillwater Avenue, where the housing authority plans 60 units of mixed-income housing.

About 160 families who live at Vidal Court are expected to be relocated beginning next summer. Demolition of the six-story housing complex on Merrell Avenue, however, would not occur until 2012. As part of the city's one-to-one housing ordinance, developers must replace every affordable unit they either demolish and convert to market rate. In addition, they must try to place the units within the same neighborhood.

Unlike a prior Charter Oak project involving mixed-income townhouses in Westover, public hearings on the Merrell Avenue redevelopment proceeded without neighborhood controversy or objections. Each of the five board members who voted Monday expressed strong support for the plan.

The only wrinkle came during the board's review of a zoning approval stipulation that sought to have Charter Oak identify and preserve existing significantly-sized trees outside the areas of development. Zoning Board chairwoman Audrey Cosentini and member David Stein argued for stronger language that would give the Zoning Board more discretion over which trees were razed.

Stein at one point suggested that any tree demolition plan be approved by the board, much to the visible frustration of Charter Oak representatives in the audience.

Norman Cole, the city's principal planner, reminded the board that approval of a general development plan would entitle Charter Oak to build in the areas that had been indicated, thus giving it the right to proceed with site preparation that could involve removing trees.

"What would be the point of usurping their right if they have an absolute right to put a building there?" Cole said to Stein, adding that in such cases, "That tree's a goner."

Both Stein and Cosentini eventually settled on weaker language that would protect significantly sized trees located within the front yard area of Merrell Avenue, but not apply to places where development was approved.

Despite Cole's warnings, the issue managed to prolong the board's deliberations, which included an interruption by anxious-looking Charter Oak officials wanting to conference privately with Cole.

Of the members, Harry Parson, expressed the most annoyance with the hold-up.

When Cosentini thanked Stein, saying, "He always gets my support when he does this," Parson witheringly replied, "I wish he wouldn't."