



A rendering of the 11-unit Forest Springs housing project on State Road in Great Barrington, Massachusetts, that will begin to address the critical shortage of affordable housing opportunities.

Great Barrington adds Forest Springs to its affordable housing stock

Great Barrington — It looks like a done deal. Sometime next year, Great Barrington's affordable housing stock will increase by 11 units.

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To make it official, about 50 housing advocates showed up late Tuesday morning (April 18) at the future site of the Forest Springs development at 316 State Road (about a mile east of Belcher Square) to break ground for a new three-building, \$3 million project that will begin to address the critical shortage in affordable housing and the town's efforts to meet the state's affordable housing goals.

"It's really exciting to take this next step," Jane Ralph, the executive director of Construct Inc., the nonprofit housing services organization that collaborated on the project and will manage it. "But this is not the be-all-and-end-all."

Ralph cautioned that in terms of housing, there are still miles to go and promises to keep if Great Barrington is to meet the state goal of 10 percent of its housing classified as affordable, which in Massachusetts typically means affordable to households with income not exceeding 80 percent of the area's median income.

"We have a waiting list of 400," Ralph said. "Ten percent might not be enough."

"That speak volumes to me," said state Rep. William "Smitty" Pignatelli, whom Construct invited as its honored guest. "We want people to be able to stay here in the Berkshires and give them a leg up."

Pignatelli also had praised for the town of Great Barrington for recognizing the need for housing that's affordable and accessible.

Pignatelli recalled buying his first house in 1978 when he was 19. His parents helped him with the down payment. His monthly mortgage payment, including taxes for that home in Lenox, was \$350 per month.



Construct Inc. Executive Director Jane Ralph, at right, at the Forest Springs groundbreaking, with the project's design team at left. Photo: Terry Cowgill



State Rep. William 'Smitty' Pignatelli speaking at the groundbreaking of Forest Springs. Photo: Terry Cowgill

"I was scared to death," Pignatelli recalled. "Now, what can you get for \$350 in South County? This project is beautiful ... It's going to be what the Berkshires are all about."

Construct purchased the 12-acre site for Forest Springs in 2012 after its board saw the potential of the vacant asphalt lot on Route 23 with access to public transportation, utilities, and outdoor recreational opportunities in the hills to its south.

Two of the units are ADA accessible and two are modified for those with sensory impairment. Each building will have 95-percent efficient heating systems and be oriented for solar gain. They are also designed for future photovoltaic solar-power installations. The units will all have access to town water and sewer.

The property will be landscaped with native plants, evergreens and fruit trees, and will also include a community garden and a safe playing area for children. Construct says "housing priority for some units will be given to households coming out of homelessness, living with mental health or developmental disabilities."

Funding sources include the Federal Home Loan Bank, Mass Housing, Facilities Consolidation Fund, the Affordable Housing Trust Fund and the Great Barrington Community Preservation Act, which contributed \$220,000 last year, Ralph said. In addition, there were what Construct called "generous contributions from local private and business donors."

Work is expected to begin in mid-May with a construction period of about 12 months or more. The development partner was the Community Development Corporation of South Berkshire.

The lack of affordable housing is a regional problem. In Berkshire County alone, 45 percent of renter households and 37 percent of owner households are living in homes considered unaffordable, which is defined as households paying more than 30 percent of their income on housing.