



**CLARENCE
FANTO**

Affordable housing still the main goal

LENOX

The sad reality is that in all too many Berkshire communities, local residents can't afford to buy into the still-inflated housing market.

One of the most hotly contested pieces of land in Lenox is being considered for housing that middle and lower-middle income people could purchase. It's the 19-acre, commercially zoned site along Route 7 & 20 at Housatonic Street across from Caligari's Hardware. A proposed Tanger outlet mall in the mid-1980s and a Marriott resort in 2006 were shot down by the town.

The Community Development Corporation of South Berkshire is poised to develop the Saw Mill Brook project, aided by a most-welcome infusion of \$250,000 in low-interest loans obtained by the Trinity Church Vestry from the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts, and an additional \$50,000 from the First Congregational Church in Stockbridge.

"We wanted owner-occupied housing for teachers, retail workers, DPW employees, anyone who serves our town, those who plow the roads, people who grew up in Lenox," explained Gail Street, chair of the Trinity Parish Outreach Committee. "We wanted to serve them back by giving them that option."

The trustees of the Episcopal Diocese, impressed by the proposal, allocated \$250,000, rather than the \$100,000 sought by the newly formed, nonprofit, secular Lenox Affordable Housing Corporation, an outgrowth of the Trinity Church group.

Now comes the challenge — of the 19-acre parcel owned for at least 50 years by the Bartoni family, only 5 acres can be developed because of wetlands and ledges.

The CDC's executive director, Tim Geller, has about 17 months remaining to execute a purchase-and-sale agreement for the land if design and engineering studies demonstrate that the project is workable.

"I think there's an excellent chance that affordable, owner-occupied housing for working families will be built in Lenox," said Deborah Burke, head of the Affordable Housing Corporation. "Whether or not this can be done on the property, we'll have to wait and see."

The group's mission is "to make sure that the community's voice is part of the process, in addition to those in Town Hall performing their official roles."

Geller's South Berkshire CDC and its affiliated Tri-Corner CDC have a strong track record in mixed-income and affordable housing, with multiple projects under consideration and one soon to break ground in Great Barrington.

Within six months, Geller told us, he expects to know for certain "whether we have a bona-fide project." The development cost, as well as the number, density and type of condo units, will depend upon the feasibility study.

Emphasizing the CDC's partnership with the town and offering high praise for the "terrific commitment" by the Episcopal Diocese, he said 40 to 50 percent of the units would be reserved for first-time homeowners.

Preference would be given to applicants who live or work in Lenox.

The affordable units are expected to cost no more than \$127,500 for a one-bedroom unit, \$152,800 for two bedrooms, \$176,600 for three, and \$197,100 for four bedrooms.

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In the best-case scenario, groundbreaking for the mixed-income development would take place by the end of 2009, and units would be offered for pre-sale shortly thereafter; federal, state and local subsidies would help finance the project.

"This project came to us from the town and it was generated by the people of Lenox," he pointed out. "If the town wants this project, we can make it happen."

Lenox Select Board Chairman Roscoe Sandlin has advised residents that "affordable housing is a critical need. Real estate values have reached the point where young families cannot move into Lenox, our children cannot stay here, and our firefighters, police officers, and schoolteachers must reside elsewhere."

Sandlin also emphasized that the term "affordable housing" has been subject to "considerable misunderstanding. ... Those eligible are working people who are getting started, or who have chosen or been forced into less-than-CEO-level jobs."

As a member of a five-generation Lenox family, Select Board member Linda Procopio Messana says she and her colleagues are supporting the project as a "really good use for the property and something the town really needs." So, if the stars are properly aligned, this project could well serve as a model for other Berkshire towns facing the same challenge.