

Faith groups tackle housing

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LENOX — In the words of one developer, Saw Mill Brook is a way for faith-based organizations to “put their money where their values are.”

And an affordable housing project planned for the corner of Route 7 and Housatonic Street has become an opportunity for two local churches to play a new role in the county: affordable housing lender.

Start-up funds for the housing development have been committed by Trinity Episcopal Church and the First Congregational Church in Stockbridge, and the organizations will lend \$250,000 and \$50,000, respectively, to the project.

‘Fulfill their mission’

The churches are joining with the Southern Berkshire Community Development Corp., the entity that’s spearheading the project, and Timothy Geller, the executive director of the CDC, says the alliance between churches and community is a way for the churches to “fulfill their mission of providing housing.”

According to John Hockridge, a trustee of the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts, the partnership marks the first time that the diocese — which oversees Trinity Church and 66 other parishes in the region — has lent money to a specific project.

Hockridge, who lives in North Adams and is chairman of the diocese’s Community Investment Committee, said the diocese has loaned money to other affordable housing programs like HAP Inc., based in Springfield, but those funds were then “turned around and invested” by the recipient.

‘Tangible’ return

By directly lending to the Lenox project, Hockridge said the diocese gets a more “tangible” return.

“It gives the diocese and its parishes a way to become more actively involved,” he said.

Hockridge also noted that the diocese has \$1 million available



Eagle file photos

Trinity Episcopal Church in Lenox, above, and the First Congregational Church in Stockbridge, of which the bell tower is visible below, have lent money to the Saw Brook Mill affordable housing project.

Churches team up to help housing project

CHURCHES from B1

for community investment in Western Massachusetts.

Despite the religious community’s role in the project, Saw Mill Brook will not be owned by the diocese, and the churches have taken a “hands-off” policy in the building, designing, and ultimately, the populating, of the development.

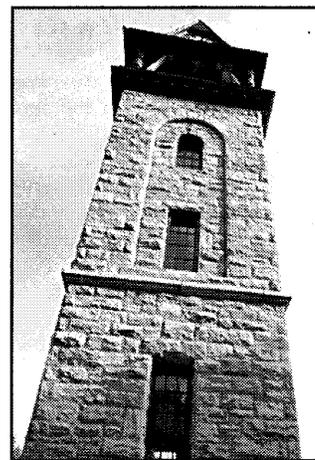
“We don’t want this to be Trinity Towers,” said Gordon Clem, who is a member of Trinity Church. “We feel very, very strongly about that.”

Based on need

Clem, who also is a member of Hockridge’s Community Investment Committee, said a secular organization known as the Lenox Affordable Housing Corp. has been set up to act as the overseer of Saw Mill Brook, and added that the project was conceived based on Lenox’s need for owner-occupied affordable housing.

He mentioned the area’s natives — particularly its younger residents and lower-to middle-class workers, “who feel they can’t afford housing.”

With them in mind, Clem and



other parishoners approached the diocese with a request for funding.

And although other parishes in the country have taken part in what Episcopal Life online magazine calls its “Hallelujah Housing” projects — such as the Diocese of Mississippi’s relief efforts in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Clem noted that Trinity Church’s role in Western Massachusetts was the region’s vanguard.

“It’s our great hope that we can write a how-to book for other parishes [that want to get

involved in affordable housing funding,” he said.

The diocese’s money will be committed in stages; an initial loan of \$50,000 will be followed by an additional \$100,000 upon permit approval, and the final \$100,000 will be lent when the project receives financing from state and federal sources.

‘Locals helping locals’

The “locals helping locals” angle also appealed to the First Congregational Church of Stockbridge, and Anne Hutchinson, chairwoman of the Church’s Mission and Action committee, said the \$50,000 loan would be used to help purchase the 19-acre parcel project.

According to Mike Wilser, who is an abutter to the property and a member of the Southern Berkshire CDC, the parcel has vernal pools and wetlands, and one of the “big concerns” is the terrain’s sizable amount of ledge — which could mean blasting would have to take place in order to build.

Wilser said a project timeline has yet to be finalized, and an economic feasibility study will be conducted in the next 90 days.