

The Berkshires

B

Sunday, December 23, 2007

Affordable Housing in Lenox

Group developing plan

By Derek Gentile
Berkshire Eagle Staff

LENOX — Seizing a more proactive stance on the issue of affordable housing, a local grass-roots nonprofit organization, the Lenox Affordable Housing Corporation, has coalesced to provide an avenue for community participation in such developments.

President Deborah Burke is one of a group that has watched portions of the town being slowly eaten by development over the past several decades. She said recently that she is the first to concede

that development is almost inevitable. But if that is true, she said, her group wants to work with developers to create more housing for people in the community.

"This town needs to have the people who make this town function be able to actually live here," she said. "For kids who grow up here, who want to come back to live here, we want to give them the opportunity to do that."

Burke, a local consultant, also is on the boards of Berkshire Entrepreneurs Network, the Literacy Network and the

Trinity Church Affordable Housing Committee and is a nonvoting member of the Lenox Affordable Housing Committee, a group that supports the project.

The Affordable Housing Corporation will not be a developer but rather will work co-operatively with the town and a developer to carry a project forward, Burke explained.

"We want to make sure the community is part of the process [when a developer comes forward]," she said. "When a developer comes to town, he has to get

the financing and make the plans to put the building in the ground. He may not know the cross-connects involved."

Burke said that the LAHC already has initiated a project and is working with Timothy Geller, executive director of the Southern Berkshire Community Development Corporation. Geller, who has coordinated affordable housing projects in Great Barrington and Stockbridge, said he is seeking to develop a 19-acre parcel on Housatonic Street for an

PLAN, continued on B6

Affordable housing the issue

PLAN from B1

owner-occupied affordable housing project.

In a unique collaboration, the seed money for this, a total of \$250,000 in the form of a low-interest loan, is being provided by a third party, the trustees of the Episcopal Diocese of Western Massachusetts, who oversee Trinity Church.

The Affordable Housing Corporation initially applied for \$100,000, but the trustees "had enough confidence in the project to offer us \$250,000," Burke said.

According to John Hockridge of North Adams, chairman of the Community Investment Committee of the Trustees, the Episcopal Diocese began in 2005 to allocate seed money for affordable housing projects.

In August 2006, Hockridge suggested supporting the Housatonic Street project. Last February, the diocese voted to support it financially.

"We have, for the first time, the chance to do community investment in the Berkshires, something that's been a long time coming," Hockridge said.

An initial \$50,000 will be used after a feasibility study is completed. The rest of the funding will come in phases

Burke, a member of Trinity Church, explained that, although the church is providing seed money, the project will be under the secular control of the Southern Berkshire CDC.

Geller said his organization has an 18-month option to purchase a 19-acre parcel on Housatonic Street, owned by Daniel Bartoni.

The property is at the corner of Route 7 and Housatonic Street, across the street from Caligari's Hardware. This was the site of a proposed Marriott Hotel that was voted down by the Zoning Board of Appeals in March 2006.

Burke explained that she and a number of residents, some of whom are on her board, realized that "someone, at some point, was going to do something with that property." This was part of the reason her group was formed, she said.

Town Manager Gregory Federspiel said the town "is very supportive of [the corporation]."