

Housing Proposal for County Property on Harris B. Dates Drive

Frequently Asked Questions – Updated July 2014

Q: Why is the County selling the property?

A: When the County Legislature made the decision to move the County Health Department to a more modern, efficient building they also made the fiscally prudent decision to sell the property on which the Health Department was located in order to help pay for the move to the new facility.

Q: Why not just keep it as public open space?

A: This property is not a conservation priority. The County and Town of Ithaca have conducted extensive reviews of our natural and agricultural resources and this site is not identified as a priority for open space protection in any of those studies. Since 2004 when the County Comprehensive Plan was developed the County has been directly involved in protecting over 540 acres of significant natural areas and nearly 2,200 acres of valuable farmland, and continues to work with community partners to protect other valuable lands. The Town of Ithaca has instituted Conservation and Agricultural zoning in appropriate areas of the Town. As noted below, as part of this project the significant resources on this site would be protected by a conservation easement. The County stands ready to collaborate with the Town or others on protection of appropriate conservation lands on West Hill.

Q: Who would the property be sold to and who would ultimately own the property?

A: The Legislature will be considering a resolution to rescind the resolution authorizing the sale of the property. Instead it will consider a resolution authorizing NRP Properties, LLC, to submit an application for a project that will be subject to a coordinated SEQR review by the County and the Town of Ithaca. No decision on a sale will be made until and unless the SEQR process is completed. NRP, Properties, LLC is a wholly owned subsidiary of The NRP Group, a nationally recognized housing development company with corporate offices in Cleveland, Ohio. NRP is located in 13 states and has developed the following projects in NY: Saratoga Homes, a 50 unit single family infill development in the City of Syracuse; Sisson Reserve, a two-phased project in the Town of Moreau, Saratoga County where the first phase of 80-units are completed and occupied; and a 48 unit single family infill development in the City of Lackawanna with construction slated for the Spring of 2014. In total, since 2010 NRP has developed, or is developing, in excess of 240 units of housing in four developments located throughout upstate NY. If the project in Tompkins County is built, the local non-profit, Better Housing for Tompkins County, will become majority owner and manager of the housing community until the units are ultimately sold to occupants, at which time Better Housing will continue to provide maintenance services to the Homeowners Association.

Q: What is the proposed use of the property?

A: The Cayuga Townhomes proposal would consist of approximately 60 units to be built on about 1/3 of the 25.5 acre site. There would be one, two, three and a couple of four bedroom units. The units would

be highly energy efficient, incorporating passive solar design, roofs designed to be ready for solar photovoltaic installation, high degrees of insulation, and energy efficient appliances that will make them 50-80% more efficient than units built to the current code requirements. The project would incorporate a pedestrian oriented design with parking at the perimeter and walking paths throughout, and include shared amenities meant to serve the residents of the community: a Common House with shared facilities such as a kitchen, library/conference room, laundry, computer room, and tool room; a large community garden; a playground, dog park, and hiking trails.

Q: Although the current proposal only plans to build on about a third of the site how can we be assured there won't be future development on the rest of the property?

A: A transfer of the property would not occur until a defined project has completed a SEQR process and been approved by the Town. It is anticipated that under any transfer of the property for this proposed project the County would retain a conservation easement on the majority of the property, and once the project is approved by the Town there will be no additional development capacity available on the site.

Q: Would the housing be for rent or ownership?

A: The project would be constructed as a rental project as required by the Federal Tax Credit Financing program. At the end of the 15 year period required by that program, the units would be offered for sale to occupants based on a formula that gives credit for the years of rent paid on the unit by the occupant.

Q: How many of the units would be "affordable" and what are the income limits for these units?

A: Between 80% and 85% of the units would be affordable to households earning between 30% and 60% of area median income. For this area, the 30% threshold means annual income of \$16,250 for a single person and \$25,100 for a five person household; 60% of median income amounts to \$32,520 for a single person and \$50,160 for a five-person household. Between 15% and 20% of the units would be affordable to households earning 90% of median income which amounts to \$48,780 for a single-person household and \$75,420 for a five-person household.

Q: Why wasn't a more extensive State Environmental Quality (SEQR) Review performed previous to this?

A: It was always anticipated that before the property was actually sold to the developer, a detailed SEQR review of all aspects of the project would be conducted. This review will happen when the development permits are requested from the Town of Ithaca. The Town of Ithaca retains jurisdiction and responsibility for land use decisions in the Town and is the appropriate lead agency for the evaluation of all impacts and potential mitigation. As a practical matter these impacts could not be fully addressed prior to the Town review process. The County will participate in that review process as an involved agency under SEQR.

Q: How would the undeveloped portion of the land be protected?

A: More than half of the site would be permanently protected as open space through a legal conservation easement limiting its development. The easement would assure that the property is retained as forest land, that the stream corridor around Indian Creek is fully buffered and that a small wetland on the site is protected. Other portions of the site, such as the Community Garden and recreation areas, would remain open space as part of the approved site plan.

Q: What about impacts on neighbors?

A: The County has been very careful to ensure that any plan for development buffers residential neighbors along Indian Creek Road, Dubois Road and Route 96. A buffer of forested land at least 150' wide would be maintained along the property frontage on Indian Creek and Dubois Roads, as well as along the western boundary of the property. Development would be oriented towards Harris B. Dates Drive directly across from the Biggs Building that is now owned by Cayuga Medical Center.

Q: Would there be traffic impacts on Route 96?

A: Traffic impacts will be evaluated in the Town review of this project. The County understands that traffic is a real concern for people living on West Hill and anticipates that transportation mitigation measures, such as a pedestrian walkway connection to transit, will be a part of efforts to mitigate traffic impacts. The exact scope of those improvements will be determined through the Town's review process. Additionally, it is envisioned that at least some of the residents of the project would work at the neighboring medical facilities and be able to walk to work.

With regard to the bigger issue of traffic flow in and around Ithaca, The *Route 96 Corridor Study*, conducted in 2008, was prepared to better understand traffic patterns. The Study evaluated various levels of hypothetical development in this area and determined that, even at higher densities than proposed by this project, levels of service at key intersections would not be significantly degraded. Still, we understand the inconvenience that traffic delays, especially at rush hour, cause, and the County, City and Town are initiating an evaluation of past efforts to address West Hill and West End traffic. We intend to identify new actions that can be pursued to ease congestion.

Q: How would the project be financed?

A: The developer proposes to finance the project using the Federal Low Income Housing Tax Credit program whereby investors can purchase tax credits to be used to offset other taxable income. The proceeds of those purchases are dedicating to financing the construction of affordable housing. This is the primary financing program that the Federal government has established to support the construction of affordable housing in the United States. This financing mechanism was used to finance the Breckenridge Place building on Seneca Street in the City of Ithaca.

Q: How much will the County be paid for the property?

A: The County Request for proposals listed a minimum price of \$500,000 based on the County Assessment Department's estimate of a per unit value for land for this type of development. However, it is anticipated that off-site improvements to the transportation system, which may include pedestrian walkways and possibly a transit shelter, are likely to be required as part of the project review. Funds may be allocated for this purpose and the net return to the County is likely to be close to the appraised value in 2009 of \$340,000 based on likely development for low-density suburban-style housing if offered on the general real estate market.

Q: How does this project relate to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Climate Showcase Communities grant?

A: This site was identified in the 2010 application submitted by Tompkins County and EcoVillage at Ithaca's Center for Sustainability Education as one of three sites on which to demonstrate the lessons learned during 20 years of developing EcoVillage. The other two projects are the completed Aurora Pocket Neighborhood in the City of Ithaca and the Third Residential EcoVillage Experience (TREE) neighborhood currently under development at EcoVillage. The County site is intended to show how the principles of energy efficiency and pedestrian-oriented communities can be applied in a more traditional real estate setting than the co-housing model used at EcoVillage. No funding from the grant is being used to subsidize development of this project.

Q: Would this project increase crime on West Hill?

A: We do not believe there is any basis for concluding that this project would have more of an impact on crime than any other housing development. Several aspects of this project distinguish it from some affordable housing projects:

- it would be managed by Better Housing for Tompkins County, a long-standing local not-for-profit affordable housing agency with an established record of effective property management;
- the project would engage residents in cooperative decision-making regarding the management of shared resources such as the Community Garden and Common House;
- the project would incorporate active recreation opportunities for youth and adults alike within the development;
- the pedestrian-oriented design would provide "many eyes on the neighborhood" which acts to counteract criminal behavior;
- by its nature this neighborhood would be attractive to households interested in participating in a sustainable model for living;
- we expect a significant number of units would be occupied by individuals working at Cayuga Medical Center or nearby medical offices providing a strong attachment to the neighborhood;
- the project would be mixed income including units affordable to households ranging from 30% to 90% of median income.

All of these factors taken together would contribute to a shared sense of community not always found in other housing developments, including typical suburban residential subdivisions.

Q: Would this project conform to the Town of Ithaca Comprehensive Plan?

A: The original intent of the project was to apply for a Planned Development Zone (PDZ) based on the Pedestrian Neighborhood Zone model zoning provisions developed for the Climate Showcase Communities project. However, after meetings with the Town of Ithaca reduced the scope of the project from 70 to 60 units it was determined that the project could potentially comply with the current zoning and subdivision ordinances' cluster provisions. That determination cannot be finally made until the review begins with the Town but the developer has stated that it is their intent to submit an application that can conform to current zoning standards, if possible. If that is not possible, a PDZ application, as provided in the zoning ordinance, would likely be submitted.

The current draft Town of Ithaca Comprehensive Plan states that this area would be suitable for "clustered developments ... close to urbanizing and developed areas, where utilities and more frequent public transit service may be available." This site's proximity to Cayuga Medical Center and the hourly transit service available there seem to fit these criteria. Areas with that frequency of service outside of peak commute times are extremely limited outside of the City. The plan also states that average density would be 1.5 units per acre but "may be higher if located near utilities, transit or employment centers." The plan states that open space should be equal to or greater than 50% of the site, as would be the case with this project. Given the location with existing public utilities, transit service nearby and directly adjacent to the fifth largest employer in the County, the density of 2.4 units per acre proposed for this site would appear to conform with the intent of the proposed Town of Ithaca Comprehensive Plan.

Q: Is affordable housing being concentrated on West Hill?

A: When considering this question it is instructive to examine the location of affordable housing and of new housing generally in the County. In 2012 the County Planning Department analyzed Assessment data for existing and new housing, building permits issued from 2005 to 2010, and major new housing projects proposed since 2010.

When all existing housing is considered the most affordable housing on a percentage basis is in some of the rural towns and villages such as the Towns of Enfield, Groton and Newfield, and the Village of Groton where more than 40% of the existing housing is affordable to households making 80% of median income. The lowest rates of affordability are in the City, Town of Ithaca, and Town of Ulysses where overall affordability is around 20%. Other communities range between 20 and 40%. Some communities such as the villages of Cayuga Heights and Lansing and the Town of Ithaca exhibit a very low affordability rate for single family housing. In the cases of Cayuga Heights and Lansing that is offset somewhat by the number of apartment units that are affordable.

Most new affordable housing development has been centered in the City and Town of Ithaca which are among the locations where the need is greatest. However, major new affordable housing projects have also been developed over the last decade in the Villages of Trumansburg and Dryden.

In terms of the distribution of new housing the total of built and proposed units, excluding units designed to appeal primarily to undergraduate students, is as follows:

- City of Ithaca – 889
- Town of Ithaca – 781
- Town of Lansing (outside village) – 578
- Villages – 239
- Other – 836
- Total – 3,323

Of these units the affordable units break down as follows:

- City of Ithaca – 239
- Town of Ithaca – 403
- Town of Lansing (outside village) – 12
- Villages - 82
- Other - 114
- Total – 850

The fact that more new affordable housing has been built in the Town of Ithaca is not surprising. That is where remaining developable land can be found with appropriate zoning, available public water and sewer infrastructure and proximity to employment and public transit. Although there were periods of affordable housing development concentrated on the west side of the City of Ithaca and on West Hill, the most recent large affordable rental housing developments have been in the Village of Dryden and downtown Ithaca, and the largest affordable ownership project has been developed on South Hill. Currently proposed projects are largely in the City and on West Hill. Units in proposed larger projects are nearly evenly divided between the City (381), the Town of Ithaca (334) and the Town of Lansing including the Village (324). None of the proposed projects in the City are on West Hill.