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WATERVILLE Planners OK plan for Gilman Street apartments

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WATERVILLE -- A \$9 million project to turn the Gilman Street School into 33 affordable apartments inched closer to reality Monday, as the Planning Board approved a site plan for the building.

The 5-0 vote came after a long night of discussion and with about a dozen conditions attached, including that the City Council approve a recommended zone change that allows 33, rather than the currently allowed 28, apartments.

Councilors are scheduled to hold a special meeting Tuesday to discuss results of a neighborhood impact study and expect to make a final decision on the zone change Oct. 21. If councilors approve that change, the project may go forward.

Planning Board Chairman David Geller said Tuesday that he is comfortable with the board's decision Monday night.

"I'm happy with the outcome," he said. "I think it's going to look fantastic when it's finished."

The \$9 million plan by Developers Collaborative of Portland calls for renovating the old school to historic standards.

Planners on Monday -- members Robert Garbacik and Marc Chadbourne were absent -- discussed the project for nearly 3 1/2 hours before voting.

About 10 neighbors gave input on everything from traffic and landscaping to trash removal and future use of the school's gymnasium. Developer Kevin Bunker and Pat Carroll of Carroll Associates, a landscaping firm, took part in the discussion.

Geller said Tuesday that planners recommend that if the developer does not go forward with the project, the zone reverts back to allowing only 28 apartments, rather than 33.

"We also discussed permitted use for the gymnasium and parking requirements for any of the permitted uses," he said.

The current zone allows for professional offices, apartments and a public gymnasium in the building.

Planners recommend a zone change permitting only certain uses for the gym, such as a day-care center, nursery school, public gym, commercial use, educational facility and quasi-municipal uses, such as a Halloween event or Valentine's Day dance, as have been held there in the past.

Other conditions planners stipulated: That the project be approved by the National Park Service; that either the city arborist or someone acceptable to the Planning Board inspect the project's landscape plan after it is complete to make sure it is in compliance; and that the city engineer approve a lighting plan.

Geller said the draft of the neighborhood impact study suggests that the development would not harm house values in the neighborhood, and that housing values actually could increase.

That suggestion is based on studies done in other areas where such projects have been developed, according to Geller.

"So, I found that to be very comforting, because that was one of my main concerns," he said.

Lawrence Bloom, a neighborhood resident and member of the impact study group, said that regardless of the outcome, he will be happy when the issue is over.

"I'm frustrated," Bloom said Tuesday. "I doubt the huge investment of time on my part as well as my neighbors' has been time well spent."

Bloom said he doesn't think people realize that residents who have been attending meetings and speaking out are not just trying to save the neighborhood for themselves, but also attempting to save a "special little piece of Waterville for all the residents of the city.

"It is ridiculous when some Planning Board members pretend to be transportation consultants and essentially predict traffic patterns out of mere speculation and yet choose to ignore what we say we observe in terms of patterns and how we ourselves enter and exit the neighborhood," Bloom said.

"Doubling traffic down Morrill Ave. would be a darned shame."

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