

Affordable Housing Project Sparks Debate in Mackinaw City

Supporters Say New Option Would Be a Plus for Business, Schools, Young and Elderly People

By Paul Gingras

Mackinaw City may become home to a new 30-unit affordable housing project designed for people with incomes below the area average. The prospective project is part of an effort to make the village affordable for young and elderly people, encourage more year-around businesses, provide schools with new students, and increase the non-transient labor force.

Following heated debate at its regular meeting, Thursday, April 6, the Mackinaw City Village Council voted to send Community Development Director Steve Schnell and Village Manager Jeff Lawson to Lansing to meet with members of the Michigan State Housing Development Authority (MSHDA) to research the project and determine whether the city has a sufficient medium-to-low-income market to accommodate the apartment complex.

The building plan involves five two-story structures with six apartments each.

According to a housing study done by Community Research Services of Okemos, 26 of the village's 859 residents need of more affordable housing. Further, a study done by the Maryland-based Chesapeake Group suggested that inexpensive housing is needed to develop more year-around businesses, Mr. Schnell said.

"Affordable Housing" is a term for government-backed projects in which private developers receive low interest loans by MSHDA to develop high quality dwellings,

Mr. Schnell explained. The rent in affordable housing units varies by income and family size. The concept, he said, is that families paying more than 30 percent of their income for rent are overly burdened by housing costs. Affordable housing projects counter this problem by enabling a resident to pay 90 percent of his rent, if he can afford it, or as little as 20 percent, if that is what he can

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afford.

The estimated rent in the housing units proposed in Mackinaw City ranges from \$260 to \$690 per month, and to make sure the units stay in good shape, developer Jerry Haan would pay into a building maintenance fund. This fund would prevent the units from becoming run-down, unsightly buildings because MSHDA would have access to the account and make upgrades when necessary.

"This keeps people proud of where they are living," Mr. Schnell said.

Village President Robert Heilman said the project is necessary to combat what he called "artificially high real estate prices in Mackinaw City."

"Even locals like myself are being shut out," he said. "It's difficult to buy a home in Mackinaw City for under \$100,000 anymore. Young people can't afford that." He added that he did not want the village to become "a high-end community." To have a "living community," he said, the village needs a mix that includes all age groups and income levels.

President Pro Tempore Sandra Planisek strongly objected to the size of the project, which she said would double the number of lower-income residents in the community and raise the overall population approximately 10 percent. She also questioned whether the school system could accommodate the number of students it could bring to Mackinaw City.

Further, she added that 20 residential lots would be sold by the village for the project, but the village

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would make much less in taxes from an affordable housing complex (which receives a tax abatement) than if the village sold the land to traditional developers. In fact, she said, the village would make more money by selling only

two lots.

Mr. Heilman countered that the village is not presently receiving any tax income on the lots, and Mr. Schnell added that the village could not sell 20 lots at once to traditional developers, anyway.

"If we did that, we'd glut the market," he said. "There isn't demand for that many lots right now. We'd also be competing with other landowners selling lots in the area."

Rather than taxes, Mr. Haan would provide the village with an annual "Payment in Lieu of Taxes" of about \$8,000, Mr. Schnell said, but the village will not know how much revenue the project will actually produce until it is built and operating.

Trustee James Alford said he understood Mrs. Planisek's concerns, but added that the project is necessary.

"During my eight years on this board," he said, "we have talked

and talked about helping establish year-around businesses and decent paying jobs, but nothing has taken place." He cited the costly Chesapeake Group study, which mentioned the need for affordable housing in Mackinaw City, and said, "Someone must take a step forward."

The housing project could attract businesses dissuaded from locating in an area because their employees could not find affordable housing, Mr. Schnell said.

"With job development comes housing development, and vice versa," he added.

Mr. Schnell said there are a number of parents who would like to place their children in the Mackinaw City schools but cannot do so because housing costs prevent them from living in town. Further, they are dissuaded by high fuel costs from transporting their kids into Mackinaw City.

Following the meeting, village representatives contacted Jeff Curth, superintendent of Mackinaw City schools, who said the school can comfortably handle 45 additional students, unless they are all concentrated in one or two grades. If more than 45 students were to arrive, he added, the school system would simply gain an opportunity to build new classrooms and hire more teachers.

A major problem affordable housing projects have in getting local approval, Mr. Schnell said, is a common misconception that they are geared to low-income residents and could increase the impoverished population in areas where they are built. This project, however, he said, is geared toward people with medium-level incomes. The concept is to make housing "affordable." There are already housing projects in the area designed for low-income residents, he said.

Another problem posed by Mrs. Planisek concerned the potential for the new apartments to draw residents from existing low-income projects in the area, leaving them vacant. It could also draw more transient labor, she added.

This issue can only be solved by research, Mr. Schnell said.

"We have to get consultants to come back and confirm the market demand," but in terms of transient laborers, Mr. Schnell said they would be unlikely to pass the screening process required to get an apartment. This would include completion of a long application, a

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Spring Cleaning: Getting Ready for Opening Day

Chris Barker, Star Line's new St. Ignace main dock operational manager, hoses down the company's parking lot Tuesday, April 18, in preparation of Star Line's first day of the season, Monday, April 24.

Electronic Waste To Be Collected at St. Ignace Sat.

By Paul Gingras

In Mackinac County, electronic waste (also known as e-waste) may be disposed of Saturday, April 22, at United Methodist Church in St. Ignace, from 9 a.m. to noon. There will be no drop-off at three other churches listed in an article published last week in *The St. Ignace News*. St. James Lutheran Church in Rudyard, Bethel Lutheran Church in Cedarville, and St. Stephen's Episcopal Church in DeTour are part of the project, but are not designated drop-off sites. On Mackinac Island, e-waste can be dropped off on the Arnold Dock Friday, April 21, from 3 p.m. to 5 p.m. and Saturday from 8 a.m. to 11 a.m. In Chippewa County, e-waste can be dropped off at the Catholic Newman Center and the First United Presbyterian Church. Both are located in Sault Ste. Marie.

The public may drop off communication equipment including personal computers, laptop computers (including hard drives, monitors, and printers), cell phones, traditional phones, faxes, televisions, VCRs, compact disk players, stereos, and high-fidelity record players. Small businesses, households, and church members can turn in e-waste. There is no limit to the amount of materials dropped off and no cost, said Pastor Tari Stage-Harvey, a coordinator of the project.

Items that will not be taken include broken monitors and other devices with jagged glass or metal, she said, and household poisons and batteries, microwave ovens, and other electric household appliances or implements, including power tools.

No item can be larger than one person can lift. The waste will be taken to a downstate recycling center approved by the Environmental Protection Agency and the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, she added.

The effort is part of a stewardship program called Clean Sweep, designed to keep toxic waste out of landfills and water sources. Heavy metals such as lead, zinc, chromium, cadmium, and mercury are often found in electronic devices. In sufficient quantity, these substances can harm humans and animals.

Nine U.P. church communities representing a variety of faiths are taking part in the program by teaching their members about the dangers of toxic waste in the environment. According to Pastor Stage-Harvey, looking out for the environment is related to the Christian faith, and churches are examining how well they are doing as stewards by addressing issues such as how well each building recycles, for example.

The Clean Sweep idea emerged from a brainstorming session by the Earthkeeper organization, which has 25 members from around the U.P. Earthkeeper met in Big Bay in December 2005 at one of the group's three annual retreats. The first took place on Mackinac Island in July 2004, during which the group's charter was developed. The charter brought together a wide variety of faiths to focus on environmental concerns.

For more information on the disposal project, call Pastor Tari Stage-Harvey of Zion Lutheran Church in St. Ignace or Trinity Lutheran Church in Brevort at 643-7870.

Senior Driver Safety Program Planned at St. Ignace in May

A driver safety class designed for older adults will be offered at St. Ignace Wednesday, May 10, and Thursday, May 11, sponsored by AARP (American Association of Retired Persons). It will be held from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the United Methodist Church. The cost is \$10, to partially cover the cost of workbooks and materials.

Registrations may be made by calling Gladys Tamlyn at 643-8088.

The program teaches adults to compensate for physical changes of aging, as they apply to safe driving. The program covers rules of the road including recent

changes in the law, discussion of normal age-related changes that affect driving, effects of medications, and newer vehicle equipment.

This session will introduce an updated curriculum, including a new video and easier-to-use workbook.

Of the 10 million people who have taken the course since 1979, 80 percent said they have changed their driving habits as a result, reporting most often that they check blind spots more frequently, use the three-second rule, and keep their eyes moving to scan the road, AARP reported.

Fund Balance \$23,000 Higher Than Expected at St. Ignace Area Schools

By Paul Gingras

School budgets are ever-changing, said Superintendent Mike Springsteen, and this month the latest revision for St. Ignace Area Schools showed a better-than-expected bottom line, to the tune of \$23,000. The school over-budgeted for property and casualty insurance, workers compensation, and other operating costs, said business manager Kathy McLeod, who presented her report at the school board meeting Monday, April 10. A final budget will be presented in June, she added.

She announced that the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians reimbursed the school \$17,500 for summer teaching expenses and software at the Juvenile Detention Center in St. Ignace. The software, called PLATO, is part of the mathematics and science curriculum at the facility. It helps students keep up with their studies before returning to regular classes. The district provides two half-day teachers, Dave Brines and Pat Shiemke. Together, they cover math, science, history, English, and even physical education classes for the 13 to 19 court-placed students who live there at a given time, Superintendent Mike Springsteen said. The facility can handle up to 24 students.

Students stay at the detention center for as little as one day or as long as three months, he added, so the software is invaluable to them when returning to regular classes because it provides test results and comprehensive records of their studies.

The school board has completed a two-year revision of the most difficult section of the Board Policy Operating Procedures manual, the 8,000 Section, Mr. Springsteen said, which will be online for parents and students to review by the next board meeting.

The manual addresses discipline and how students are to be treated in the district. Once the manual is online, alterations recommended by the Michigan Association of School Boards (MASB) that result from court cases and legislative changes can be made easily, Mr. Springsteen said. Parents can review them as they are instituted.

Revising the manual, he added, was a good way for the school board to familiarize themselves in the policies they must deal with.

Although school administrators have yet to figure out exactly how the state's new curriculum requirements will be applied, "What does appear to be certain is that our high school curriculum offerings are going to need to change to meet these requirements," Mr. Springsteen told the board.

This year's seventh graders will be the first group affected by the new mathematics, reading, and foreign language requirements. They will be graduated in 2011.

"At our professional development afternoon on May 3," said high school Principal Don Gustafson, "we will begin the planning process with our staff. . . This will be a primary focus of our school improvement committee team in the next few years."

In another matter, 2x4 Construction beat out eight other bidders to replace shingles and examine the ice and water shield beneath them on the LaSalle High School roof. The company will do the work for \$12,800, while other bids ranged to \$20,046. The roof leaks during the winter when the ice backs up, and could destroy the new gymnasium floor, Mr. Springsteen said.

Custodian Curt Thorin will leave his job May 1 after 11 years with the district and had mastered what Mr. Springsteen described as

a complex job. His position will be taken over by Jack McLean, who has been training with Mr. Thorin since April 3.

After 10 years with the district, special education teacher Patty Vink has taken a teaching position in Alaska. She took a leave of absence last year to explore the position, and decided to stay. Her new school can only be accessed by plane.

"She is an excellent teacher," Mr. Springsteen said, but the arrangement works out well for her and for the district. Had she returned, the school board would have had to lay off another teacher.

The board continues to face litigation by Jennifer Powell, a laid-off language arts and social studies teacher who contends that she was inappropriately dismissed, while a teacher without tenure and with less experience was retained. Friday, March 17, the district was notified that an Unfair Labor Charge was filed with the Michigan Employment Relations Commission by the Michigan Education Association.

Ms. Powell is now fighting for a job in three legal arenas, the State Tenure Commission, Contract Arbitration Hearing, and the Michigan Employment Relations Commission. The Michigan Association of School Boards Legal Trust Fund will pay half the board's legal fees, up to \$10,000.

Governor Jennifer Granholm has signed a bill clarifying that district employees who must have be fingerprinted for background checks include other contracted teachers, administrative workers, food service personnel, bus drivers, janitors, and counselors. Background checks will not be done on construction workers or delivery people.

Courthouse Fire Alarm System Fails

The fire alarm system at the Mackinac County Courthouse and Annex buildings failed to activate during a fire evacuation drill in late March. County commissioners agreed April 13 to get the system repaired immediately.

"This took us by surprise," said County Clerk Mary Kay Tamlyn.

The fire drill was intended to test the county's Emergency Evacuation Plan that was adopted in 2005 by county commissioners. The drill was to help evaluate and train staff on proper procedures, though it was called off when the alarms failed to activate.

The fire evacuation drill was requested by Mrs. Tamlyn.

St. Ignace Fire Chief John "Bucky" Robinson attempted to conduct the test by manually activating the fire alarms in both buildings.

In a letter to commissioners, Mr. Robinson wrote that after the alarms failed to activate, he investigated the alarm panels and found that none were in proper working order.

"All alarm panels were disconnected from their outside remote notification phone lines, control heads were found to be either disconnected or inoperable, and all manual alarm activation devices were not working," he wrote.

Midstate Security, which has offices downstate and a service center in Sault Ste. Marie, installed the system approximately two years ago, said Mrs. Tamlyn.