

West Rehoboth duplex plan stirs emotions

Project's fate in hands of Sussex County officials

By Ron MacArthur | Aug 05, 2011

Georgetown — No one disputes that affordable housing is desperately needed in the small community of West Rehoboth. The question that surfaces is what shape that housing should take.

The West Rehoboth Community Land Trust has a plan to build a duplex, but some residents and landowners say the plan is flawed, and the community should remain single-family homes.

The fate of the land trust's initial new housing project is in the hands of Sussex County officials. After a pair of public hearings, those for and against an application to construct a duplex on Dunbar Street have had their say. Now it's time for planning and zoning commissioners to make its recommendation and ultimately for county council to have the final word.

Comments during council's Aug. 2 public hearing on the conditional-use application varied little from testimony during the planning and zoning commission hearing. The commission, which appears to be divided on the application, has not made a recommendation. Without a recommendation, council cannot put the matter back on an agenda for a vote.

Proponents say because of the cost of the land, a duplex is the only way to keep the project affordable. Opponents say the project would set a precedent in a community of single-family homes.

Community needs affordable housing

Speaking for the applicant, attorney Heidi Gilmore said under the county's land-use plan, a duplex was a permitted use with approval of a conditional-use application in a general-residential district. The proposed duplex would front on Dunbar Street with another unit facing Hebron Road.

Gilmore said the land trust's mission statement contains goals to provide affordable housing and preserve the neighborhood. "This is an ideal location; the community needs affordable housing," she said.

She said the duplex would have the appearance of two homes attached front to back with four parking spaces along Dunbar Street. She said the parking lot has been designed to allow enough room for vehicles to turn and exit without backing into the street. Parking was an issue raised during the planning and zoning hearing.

The land trust could rent or sell the units. In either case, the land trust would own the land in an effort to make rent or mortgage payments more affordable, Gilmore said.

"No one can question West Rehoboth needs affordable housing, and the land trust has resident applicants already interested in units," Gilmore said.

The attorney added land values in the community are inflated and will only increase because of surrounding uses. “West Rehoboth is walled in by other developments,” she said.

Beth Doty, a land trust board member, said land is so expensive in the community that the only way to keep the project affordable was to maximize the use of the parcel and provide two units. “We need to help those who have fought this battle too long alone,” she said.

The land trust has an option to purchase the 7,000-square-foot parcel for about \$100,000 contingent on application approval, according to board member Mable Granke. “The stark reality is we simply can’t do it with one house and make it affordable,” she said.

Other options available to provide housing

Robert Paul, who owns property in West Rehoboth, said the land trust has good intentions, but it is going about solving the problem in the wrong way.

He suggested the land trust use the funds committed to this project – which could total as much as \$350,000 for land purchase and construction – to purchase 15 repossessed modular homes from area banks and replace substandard homes in the community. “That would help right away. It’s time to do the right thing for West Rehoboth,” Paul said.

Paul said a rental multifamily unit would disenfranchise other homeowners to benefit one or two families. “I’m not against affordable housing, just multifamily housing,” he said.

Paul, who has worked on Section 8 and subsidized housing projects for more than 30 years in the Baltimore area, also said approval of the application would open the door to other projects. “Speculators will come in for multifamily [projects],” he said.

He also noted that Dunbar Street, a gravel road, is narrow and not conducive to construction of a duplex.

Residents speak for and against application

Eleanor Whaley, a Dunbar Street resident since the 1970s, urged everyone to work together for the betterment of West Rehoboth. She said some untrue statements about the community were made during the planning and zoning commission hearing, but she has forgiven those who spoke. “There is room here enough for all to live and get along,” she said. Whaley is vice president of the land trust and president of West Side New Beginnings.

Norwood Street resident Latina Waples had to cut her testimony short when she broke into tears. “I wouldn’t mind a decent place for me and my son to live,” she said.

Helen Norris, another Norwood Street resident, said it’s time for a change in West Rehoboth. “Can we do it? Yes we can if we all work together,” she said.

Norwood resident Arnell Brittingham disagreed. “This will not create jobs but only create problems. We need to get kids off the streets first,” he said. “We need to educate our kids instead of building.”

“I worked hard for my property to pay for it,” said Stephanie Shelton of Norwood Street. She said she was not in support of the application because people should not get a handout. “If this is approved why can’t I put another mobile on my lot and rent it out?” she asked.

“I don’t get. This is a win-win for everybody involved,” said board member Randy Taylor, who is president of Fulton Bank. “How can it not be better?” he asked.

“The community deserves to survive,” Granke said. She added that referring to a duplex as multifamily housing is ironic because in other jurisdictions duplexes are considered single-family housing. “All they have is a common wall. The basic reason for this application is for residents who want to live and stay here,” she said.

Granke said residents should not have to live in substandard manufactured homes. “Residents are told if they complain, the homes will be torn down and leave them homeless,” she said.

The Sussex Housing Group, part of the Delaware Housing Coalition, has endorsed the project. Gina Miserendino said the model proposed by the land trust would be a step to saving the community for its residents. She said the only factor holding the land trust back is excessive land prices in the area. “Building duplexes is appropriate for a balanced housing plan. Nearby Canal Corkran has them,” she said.

County could set precedent with approval

Frank Bruffey, who owns property in West Rehoboth, said he is not opposed to the land trust, but he said allowing one property owner to construct multifamily housing and not others is not a level playing field. “If multifamily is good for West Rehoboth, then the zoning should be changed so all could take advantage of that and give everyone that tool,” Bruffey said.

He said the land trust’s expectations were out of synch with reality. “The business model of the land trust keeps property values low, and that bothers me,” he said. “As a property owner, now I will have to change my business plan if an exception is made to one stakeholder.”

Norman Steward, a resident of nearby Canal Corkran, said he was concerned about crime trends in the area and the impact high-density multifamily housing would have to potentially increase crime. After contacting Troop 7, he said so far this year Delaware State Police have used 600 hours of overtime related to West Rehoboth and made 30 felony and 20 misdemeanor arrests. “A duplex would concentrate more problems in the area and create an isolated pocket,” he said. “I’m in favor of single-family homes.”

Douglass Earp, who renovated a Norwood house three years and lives there with his family in the summer, said the land trust and county should first focus on infrastructure improvements in the

community. He suggested officials look at connecting Norwood Street to Hebron Road to create another entrance into West Rehoboth.

His wife, Helena, said the addition of duplexes would change the character of the community.