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May 16 LCU Local Assembly via Zoom: Affordable housing project gets boost

(Edited from News Sun and Chicago Tribune Newspapers)

Elise Helland, a member of Lake County United and St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Waukegan, said US HealthVest, the owner of the property and operator of the Lake Behavioral Hospital, plans to donate 25 acres of vacant land behind the hospital for the housing project.

Though the proposed project was originally larger, Helland said there will be 60 townhomes for essential workers and their families, as well as 25 apartments for individuals with special needs. It is smaller to blend in with the area and remain affordable.

“This is not about pleasing everyone,” Helland said. “Rather, it is about creating something where people are willing to show up for and support. We can't please everyone, but we need a plan that people can support by showing up because that is how we deliver results for a better future.”

The donation and a description of the project were discussed at the Lake County United Virtual The May 16 Assembly, gave more than 185 participating through computer screens an update on the group's affordable housing, mental health, and gun violence initiatives.

“People will be looking out on green space, not a bunch of apartment buildings,” Helland said. “It will be less dense and have more open space. It fits in better with the surrounding neighborhood and keeps the units affordable.”

The townhomes will mostly have three bedrooms. Garages will also be included. Helland said they are geared to essential workers with families. Approximately a third of the property is wooded, with existing trails.

People living in the area use the trails. Helland said they will be able to continue to do so. She said there is a possibility of partnering with the Waukegan Park District for maintenance of the trails.

Along with the donation of the land, Helland said Lake County United has raised \$5 million and has another \$2 million committed in loans.

The organization is seeking an additional \$2 million. Some of the money will be used to demolish existing structures which are no longer used.

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Along with raising money, Helland said Lake County United is working with a builder and architect. By the end of the summer, she hopes there will be a signed contract with HealthVest for acquisition of the land.

Once the contract is signed, Helland said Lake County United will be able to seek a recommendation from the Waukegan Planning and Zoning Commission and final approval from the Waukegan City Council. With those authorizations, the organization can work with the Illinois Housing Development Authority to further finance the project.

At the end of the assembly, Helland asked people to commit to attend the municipal meetings in Waukegan to show support for the effort. Another attendee and Lake County United leader, Elyse Danckers, challenged the group to be steadfast and “not wait another 14 years for the next affordable housing project.”

One person who looks forward to the project’s completion is Destani Boyd, a Waukegan native, Waukegan High School graduate and now an academic adviser for Waukegan to College. Though she works in Waukegan, she now lives in Wisconsin for economic reasons.

“This project is an opportunity to move back home,” Boyd said. “Our vision for this housing project is to bring affordable and sustainable housing to families in Waukegan (so) single moms and dads do not struggle with rent and groceries at the same time.”

Along with Helland’s presentation to the assembly, participants heard about efforts to create affordable housing in Libertyville, as well as mental health and gun violence initiatives. Lee Sachnoff talked about the dangers of guns around a home.

“We know an unsecured loaded gun in the home can definitely increase the chance of a suicide attempt being successful,” Sachnoff said. “We also know small children do not understand the danger of playing with guns. A toddler can pick up a gun, point it and pull the trigger.”