

HAMILTON COUNTY

Fishers council OKs low-income housing proposal previously criticized as 'way too dense'

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Published 5:00 a.m. ET Feb. 15, 2021 | Updated 10:46 a.m. ET Feb. 16, 2021

Update: The Fishers City Council approved the zoning change that clears the way for construction of 11 low-income rental cottages at 141st Street and Cumberland Road, named Cumberland Cottages.

The 5-4 vote came after an hour of discussion and follows an 8-1 vote in opposition to the project before the Fishers Plan Commission last week.

Councilors voting in favor were: David George, Cecilia Coble, Brad DeReamer, Jocelyn Vare and Samantha DeLong.

The project will now go before council committees for review of the specific building plans.

Read more here about what happens next.

Earlier: The fate of a low-income housing proposal near State Road 37 is in doubt while it heads to the Fishers City Council for consideration, highlighting the delicate political terrain lawmakers must navigate as they address a gaping affordable housing needs across the region.

The development for 11 rental cottages on the southwest corner of 141st and Cumberland was rejected overwhelmingly by the Fishers Plan Commission. Citing concerns about traffic, home values and density, the panel voted 8-1 to on Feb. 3 to send the proposal to the City Council with an "unfavorable" recommendation.

The council will make the final decision on whether Cumberland Cottages is approved at a meeting Monday. The three councilors who sit on the Plan Commission — Selina Stoller, Todd Zimmerman and Pete Peterson — were among those who voted against the project.

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The executive director of Hamilton County Area Neighborhood Development (HAND), the developer, said she was “stunned” by the panel’s vote because the Plan Commission staff had recommended it for approval, as had another council committee just last month.

“We invited more than four dozen neighboring property owners to attend two public input sessions in December, and of the handful who attended only one expressed any concern,” said Andrea Davis. “My presentation to the Plan Commission addressed many of their stated concerns, but I am revising it (for the council meeting) to focus on dispelling the myths around this kind of development.”

The location of project is a vacant grass covered lot now. The homes would be 1 1/2 stories and have one to three bedrooms. They would face a central green and each home would have a carport.

The cottages would be rented to lower-wage earners who make 60% of the area’s median income and are intended to provide the suburb’s service industry, hospitality and other workers places to live near their jobs.

'Amazing' opposition to plan

Councilors on the plan commission said they had received dozens of calls and emails from nearby residents opposed to the project, some who accused renters of not taking care of their property or leaving trash in the street. Others complained that the carports were unseemly or the cottages looked shabby.

One person who spoke before the commission said the homes were “a step above a trailer park.”

Councilman Peterson said he had gotten 50 phone calls in opposition.

“It is amazing to me what the community gets fired up about,” Peterson said at the meeting, but added, “It is way too dense and I’m not thrilled about the way it looks.”

Davis told the panel the homes were built to the same quality as any fair market apartments. She cited studies that showed that property values do not decrease when low-income apartments are built nearby — and often increase.

The complex would be next to Country Fields at Fishers, a community of 118 condominiums, and across the street from 45-acre Prairie Lakes Apartments in Noblesville. But some plan commission members said the Cumberland Cottages project was too large.

Councilman Zimmerman and others on the panel said they were most concerned about traffic because the project would be next to a roundabout at 141st Street and Cumberland and cars going in and out of Cumberland Cottages could pose a danger.

Zimmerman said this week he would work with HAND, a low-income housing non-profit, to see if the project could be relocated.

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“I love their mission,” Zimmerman said. “It’s the location I’m most concerned about. I am researching now to find out if there is another spot for it.”

He said the city needs affordable housing to serve the fast-growing city's expanding lower-income workforce.

“I want people to live in the community they serve,” he said. “We need to find ways to keep people in the county so they can work here.”

A perfect location

Davis said HAND had looked at several sites before striking the deal on 141st Street, which turned out to be ideal for its needs.

“It’s close to jobs, schools, health care and a grocery store. It’s on the trail network. It’s close to State Road 37,” Davis said. “These are all important factors when building affordable housing because transportation is an issue.”

Additionally, she said, any site is likely to face some opposition, “unless there aren’t neighbors and, in that case, the site wouldn’t be near any of the required amenities.”

With protest outside: HSE school board gives 2 differing statements on Black Lives Matter

The Cumberland Cottages project would be the first in Fishers for HAND, which has built

low-income housing in Carmel, Noblesville, Sheridan and Cicero, mostly for seniors. HAND has an agreement to buy about two acres on which the cottages would sit on for \$289,000 and will seek a federal housing grant to pay the estimated \$2.5 million in construction costs, Davis said.

The grant application could be approved by May and construction would start in the spring of 2022, she said. The land sale won't be finalized unless the council approves the plan.

Randy McGriff, president of the condominium association at Country Fields, said the great majority of owners there oppose the cottages. "I did not have anybody contact me and say, 'I can't wait until this is finished,'" he said.

The association cited a number of reasons for the opposition, many having to do with traffic and the plan for entrance and exit to the cottages.

"The way it is set up people coming from the east would need to do U-turns right in front of our entrance to get into the cottages," he said. "Most of the people here are elderly and are worried about that congestion."

He said the condo owners also expressed concerns about who would manage the cottages and whether the property would be held to uniform standards common in homeowner's associations.

"What are the covenants concerning sidewalks, driveways and appearance?" McGriff said.

McGriff said he personally sees the need for affordable housing in the area. After all, many of the retirees in Country Fields would like their grandchildren in jobs such as the service industry to have a chance to live near them.

'Credible presentation'

Mayor Scott Fadness has acknowledged the need for low-income housing in Fishers but said "it is an emotionally charged issue" that "every community" is grappling with when it comes time to approve them.

Fadness said he would remain neutral for the time being on the Cumberland Cottages project because zoning matters are the responsibility of the city council.

“I’m going to respect the process,” he said.

The city has been building apartments at a rapid pace, mostly downtown, for about six years. But those are considered luxury or market rate apartments intended to attract high-wage young workers and retirees.

A 2018 housing needs assessment commissioned by HAND found for every 100 low-income renters or owners, there are just 69 affordable units available in Hamilton County.

The report concluded that Hamilton County will need 3,465 more rental units and 6,700 more for-sale units for low-income households by 2022.

The only Plan Commission member to vote for recommendation of the project said Cumberland Crossing meets all city requirements for zoning, building and design.

“I thought they (HAND) made a credible presentation,” said Howard Stevenson, a lawyer who has been on the commission two years. He rejected the objections based on density or the fear that property values would decrease.

“There are communities right next to it that are far more dense,” Stevenson said. “And I don’t think the empirical data is there that shows a decrease in property values.”

The public can watch a livestream of the City Council meeting at 6:30 p.m. Monday at tinyurl.com/FishersCityHall.

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