

# **Goddard Block Apartments Approved**

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Claremont — With approvals for variances from the Zoning Board of Adjustment that reduce the number of required parking spaces and allow for apartments on the first floor, New England Family Housing CEO Kevin Lacasse said he now will prepare a site plan for the Goddard Block at 54-62 Pleasant Street.

The New Hampton, N.H., business has an option on the property, which was condemned by the city this spring. Residents were forced to vacate the 24 apartments on the second and third floors. The city determined numerous life safety and building code issues that the owner had failed to correct, despite being told to do so by the fire department and building department.

At its meeting, the ZBA approved one variance for six apartments on the first floor and a second variance requiring one parking space per unit instead of the current regulation of 1½ spaces. The change means Lacasse will need 32 spaces instead of 48 for site plan approval. There are 17 spaces behind the building that come with the property, leaving Lacasse to secure 15 more.

A condition of the ZBA's approval is that Lacasse secure in writing agreements with other property owners for the needed parking spaces. There has been some discussion with the City Council about using some of the city-owned spaces behind the Goddard building, but nothing has been finalized as to how that arrangement could work.

"I'm open to all options," Lacasse said on Wednesday, adding that he has been encouraged by City Manager Ryan McNutt's vocal support for his plan and determination to have city staff solve the parking issue.

Lacasse said on Wednesday he expects to present the plan at the Planning Board's Aug. 14 meeting. Meanwhile, he said he is "diligently and actively

working on funding applications to support this project.” The estimated \$4 million needed to renovate the upper two floors and add six new apartments on the ground floor in the rear of the building will come from grants, low-income housing tax credits and private financing.

If approvals for a Community Development Block Grant and low-income housing tax credits from the New Hampshire Housing Authority are approved later this year, Lacasse said he would complete the architectural drawings and bid the project in the winter and the estimated nine months of construction would begin early next summer.

The plan described by White River Junction architect Frank J. Barrett at the ZBA meeting is to gut the interior down to the studs and replace all the electrical, mechanical, plumbing and roofing systems.

“They are shot,” he said.

On the first floor there would be a new entryway in the back, facade repairs, a community space for residents and a manager office, in addition to the new apartments.

“This is going to be a complete overhaul of the building. It warrants it,” he said.

Both Lacasse and City Planner Mike McCrory said the ZBA’s decision on parking will lead to a broader discussion on meeting the parking challenges in the downtown area, which many agree has become an impediment to helping the area recover economically.

“This can be a catalyst to solve the larger parking problem downtown,” Lacasse said.

McCrory said other downtown building owners also have sought solutions to the lack of parking.

“We want to work with all property owners, not just on Kevin’s project but all of downtown,” McCrory said.

To support the variance, McCrory said, he did research using U.S. census data and found that on average there is less than one vehicle per unit in the downtown area.

Two other downtown building owners spoke in support of reducing the required parking for the Goddard Block and also allowing first-floor apartments.

Gary Trottier, who owns the Union Block at the corner of Pleasant Street and Opera House Square, said the city needs to rethink its approach to improving the downtown and can't continue to hope for new retail establishments in the vacant storefronts.

"I am very excited about this venture," Trottier said of Lacasse's plan. "These buildings need to be repurposed and we need to increase the population downtown."

That in turn would spur more demand for services which would lead to an improved commercial and retail climate, he and others said.

New Hampshire Family Housing also owns the former Latchis Theater building across from the Goddard Block. Lacasse renovated 13 apartments and said he has no vacancies. To meet parking requirements, Lacasse said he had to use another property he owns on Sullivan Street, but added that the overflow area has never been used by his Latchis residents.