

# Developer targets 31 units for Goddard block

By TIMOTHY LAROCHE

CLAREMONT — Progress might soon be made in the redevelopment of the Goddard block on Pleasant Street after the building was condemned and tenants were evicted in early March. Kevin Lacasse, a real estate broker with New England Family Housing, will invest and oversee the \$4 million project to rehabilitate the property.

Lacasse's rehabilitation plan would see a total "gut rehab" of the building — new electrical work, plumbing, interior work and fire systems — in order to bring the property up to city codes. The current plans for the project would open the first floor of the building to commercial spaces while expanding the number of low-income housing apartments on upper floors from 27 to upwards of 30 units.

The redevelopment process, however, is in its early stages, Lacasse said, and he must still secure funding for the costly rehabilitation. Initially, Lacasse said, he went into the project expecting to simply bring the property back to code through some repairs, but after a recent site visit, his plans for the project became much more expansive.

The property, an apartment complex located at 54-62 Pleasant St., was shut down in March following a coordinated code enforcement initiative from City Manager Ryan McNutt.

Neighborhood Improvement through Code Enforcement — a team consisting of McNutt, two building inspectors, Planning and Development Director Nancy Merrill, Deputy Fire Chief Brian Burr, Fire Chief Richard Bergeron, Welfare Department Director Suzanne Carr, Police Chief Mark Chase and City Solicitor Jane Taylor — used the Goddard block code enforcement as their inaugural effort to go after what McNutt has termed "vulture investors."

"Vulture investors," McNutt said in an interview last month, are absentee landlords who purchase cheap properties without any effort to maintain them. Often, he said, the landlords might not even return to their properties, and structural issues can go unresolved until the city steps in.

After a code investigation of the Goddard block in March, city officials found that the building posed a significant fire risk and violated a number of city codes and ordinances. The property had no functioning fire equipment or fire alarms, no sprinkler system, no egress in apartments, electrical violations, roof leaks and even an infestation of bed bugs.

“The building was in very rough condition,” Lacasse said.

WSK Goddard Limited Partnership, the owners of the building under principal owner Walter Fawcett of Wolfeboro, were given 48 hours to vacate the building after the investigation. All of the tenants were also evicted from their apartments due to health and safety concerns.

Lacasse’s investment into the property will mark the first developments of the building since the March evictions took place. Through New England Family Housing, he manages more than 600 housing units throughout the state, including the property at 54 Pleasant St. across from the Goddard block.

“I am confident the investor has the experience to complete a project of this scope and it will be a better facility and better managed at the end,” McNutt said in an email about the investment.

On top of the capital developments to the property and addition of housing and work space, Lacasse said his redevelopment efforts will also have a social component. To fulfill the requirements for the sale of tax credits, the primary source of funding for the project, the owners of the building must host events to promote financial literacy, drug awareness and prevention, and other classes for residents living there.

Lacasse said that he received complaints from people living at his 54 Pleasant St. apartment building that some of the previous tenants of the Goddard block were loitering at nearby properties and allegedly using drugs. Since the former owners did little to maintain the property or screen tenants, he said, many people living there had been rejected from other apartments.

But for the current project, Lacasse said he aims to provide housing for people living on low income like teachers and municipal employees. He also said that he intends to maintain the structure much better than previous owners.

“The properties we manage, we are very on top of in terms of maintenance,” he said. “I just want to clean up the area and make it nice.”

Work on the building, however, is not slated to begin until at least next summer. Currently, Lacasse said, he is in the process of meeting with officials from the city to bring the building back to code. He hopes to get approval for the process from the city sometime in the next few months, he said. Next year around this time, construction is expected to take about eight or nine months before tenants can move in.

Lacasse also noted that there is potential for Community Development Block Grant funding for the project. McNutt informed the Sullivan County Commissioners at their Monday meeting that the city supports the project and advocated for the county to support the potential for CDBG for the project.