

Bristol project would provide affordable housing

BY THOMAS P. CALDWELL Contributing Writer BRISTOL — Faced with a state population that is aging, with younger residents moving away to find jobs and more affordable places to live, a number of studies have recommended job training and more affordable housing to encourage younger people to remain here. The New Hampshire Legislature passed a law requiring every community to provide “reasonable and realistic opportunities” for the development of workforce housing, and Bristol’s master plan identified workforce housing as an important goal.

Now a developer is proposing a 32-unit residential development in Bristol that would provide affordable housing for working families as well as senior citizens, but a number of residents have lined up in opposition to the plan.

Kevin Lacasse of New England Family Housing in New Hampton is looking to develop property on Lake Street that previously was used for a woolen mill and then a fish farm. The new development would have 18 two-bedroom units and 14 one-bedroom units in two buildings near the Newfound River.

Appearing before the Bristol Planning Board on Feb. 10, Lacasse said he is not submitting his application as workforce housing under the statute because he does not need to call upon the provisions in the law that allow a developer to circumvent local zoning ordinances.

“What we’re doing is in compliance with the zoning here, and it’s not a huge project,” Lacasse said.

He has hired surveyors and engineers to ensure that what he builds meets the local, state, and federal provisions for the property, and has been going through the approval process with the New Hampshire Department of Environmental Services and Department of Transportation, as well as other agencies.

The source of funding is not 100 percent figured out, he said, and may involve a loan through the New Hampshire Housing Finance Authority or a local bank. Whichever route he goes, Lacasse said the aim is to provide housing that is affordable to a teacher or police officer who is starting a

career, or to an elderly couple on Social Security.

Should he go through the finance authority, the maximum rents would be set according to federal Housing and Urban Development guide lines, which he said would be capped at \$834 for a one-bedroom unit, and \$1,006 for two bedrooms. If he uses bank financing, the loan cost would be higher, so the rent also would be higher, he said, but it still would be kept affordable for working families or those on fixed incomes.

He anticipated objections about the possibility of there being subsidized housing, so he explained that the Section 8 housing for low-income people is not administered the way it used to be, with the entire project being classified as Section 8. Now, he said, the government certifies individuals as eligible under Section 8, and they can live wherever they choose, with landlords or towns unable to deny them rentals.

Lacasse distributed copies of the guidelines he uses in screening applicants, saying the application covers criminal background checks, past rental experiences, and income verification, among other things, which he said eliminates 90 percent of the problems with renters.

The second element of success, he said, is in maintaining the property, and he said there would be an on-site building manager living there. He also noted that his office is just 10 minutes away, in New Hampton.

In an interview about his plans, Lacasse said he draws from his experience in managing several other housing projects. He cited his partnership with the City of Berlin, where he has about 100 units. He said he purchased old, dilapidated buildings through private sales or directly with the city, and renovated them into "good, high-quality housing.

" Lacasse said he deals with a lot of mill towns where the manufacturing left, the housing stock was not kept up because the population shrank, and there were very few investments back into the community.

One of his projects was a foreclosed property on South Main Street in Franklin that had 30 units in two buildings. He said there had been an ongoing problem with drug use and other crimes before he bought the property and put more than a million dollars into upgrading the buildings. Among the improvements were installing heat pumps and other energy-saving features, putting in new kitchens and bathrooms, and repaving the parking lot. The result, he said, is great occupancy and no problems for the city's police

department.

“It’s now a well-managed, quality property,” he said.

Lacasse used that property, along with the Country Meadows manufactured housing development in Tilton and a renovated theater in Claremont that has 65 residential units, to do an analysis of the impact his project would have on the student population in Bristol. Those three projects, he said, resulted in an average of 1.9 students per unit. With that in mind, he projected that his Bristol project might result in seven additional students attending the Newfound Area School District. Saying that many of the renters would likely be people moving there from within the school district, Lacasse said the actual impact on Newfound’s student population would probably be one additional student.

The Lake Street property, owned by Bridgewater Investment Group, has slightly more than three acres, Lacasse said, and he has a contract to purchase it once he gets through the planning process — something Planning Board Chair Denice Destefano said could take months. While Bristol’s zoning would allow 40 units on the property, Lacasse said he is going for 32, and “We’re 100 percent in compliance with the zoning requirements, with no waivers or variances needed.

” While there are structures on the site, the Bristol housing project will be built from the ground up. New England Family Housing has done environmental studies, an endangered species review, a historical survey, and most of the engineering. Lacasse has received a shoreland permit and an alteration of terrain permit to allow the project to go forward.

Most recently, he filed a LOMA, or letter of map amendment, with the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which represents a survey of the floodplain that is more accurate than FEMA’s floodplain map, based on an aerial view of the river. Surveyor Kevin French explained that his survey accurately mapped the designated elevations so they could site the development outside of the 100year floodplain.

“We’re here, we’re established, we’re local, and we live near the post office in New Hampton,” Lacasse said, adding that he has four children attending Newfound Area schools. “We’re excited to get this going and completed.

” Not everyone in Bristol feels that way. During the planning board meeting, several members of the public questioned the board about the types of

assurances they could seek to make sure the project did not harm downstream residents or impose other burdens on the town. Several questioned the need for workforce housing at all, with businessman Doug Williams saying that, as of the previous week, Bristol had 42 units available for rent.

“Does Bristol need more?” he asked.

Donna Nashawaty voiced outright opposition, asking for an independent impact study.

“I question whether there is a realistic need for that housing,” she said.

Selectman Shaun Lagueux asked whether other communities had required the developer to pay impact fees.

When Lacasse replied in the negative, Lagueux said, “That property was under water a few years ago.

” Susan Colby said, “People who qualify for Section 8 also have other needs, and I’m not sure the town can afford this.”

Former Selectman J.P. Morrison stood in defense of the project.

“It seems you’re going to net a lot more in taxes with this project,” Morrison commented. “We can’t have a person standing up and saying we don’t need more rental units. I’ve heard a lot of Realtors who say we need more rental units in Bristol. And the only time that property was under water was when the town created the problem by breaching the dam.”