

Portland planners OK 2 projects with more than 100 affordable apartments

By **Colin Ellis** - August 26, 2020



A rendering of the affordable housing project for seniors proposed by Community Housing of Maine at 83 Middle St., at the corner of Franklin Street, in Portland. It would have 11 units for "long-term stayers" or people who have experienced homelessness for more than 180 days. (Courtesy City of Portland)

The Portland Planning Board approved two projects that will create more than 100 affordable apartments in the city.

Both plans, one from Avesta Housing and one from Community Housing of Maine, were unanimously approved Aug. 18, with board members Maggie Stanley and David Silk recused.

The Community Housing of Maine project will be at 83 Middle St., according to the city's urban designer, Caitlin Cameron, and will have 50 apartments. Cameron said the proposal has frontage on Middle, Franklin and Newbury streets, and will be built on two parcels of land, one of which is vacant and used for parking by the Police Department. The other parcel is from a neighboring owner.

Cameron said the 50 units will be affordable and will be age-restricted to people 62 years and older. There will be a mix of efficiency units, one-bedroom, and two-bedroom units. There will also be retail space on the first floor, although a tenant has not been confirmed. The retail space would face Middle Street, and the residential entrance would be the corner of Middle and Franklin streets.

Approval required a waiver for the total number of parking spaces. Based on city calculations, 47 spaces are needed for a project this size. The applicants requested that be reduced to 12, although an engineer for the applicants said 16 spaces would be sufficient for the project's needs.

Cameron said city staff agreed with the engineer, so to meet the requirements Community Housing will have to find four additional spaces or pay an "in-lieu" fee of \$26,000.

Brian Kilgallen, development officer for Community Housing, said 12 spaces would be more than enough for an affordable housing project like this, given its proximity to nearby bus stops and ample bike storage in the facility.

"I would bet even the folks who do have a parking space are going to leave their car there and will rely on public transportation and walking," he said.

Kilgallen said the \$26,000 fee would be a significant obstacle, and would likely mean they have to cut back on services in the building. He said they could find and lease the four additional spots to reach 16, but expected those spaces would just “sit empty” and would also take away from what they could offer for the building.

Michael Tadema-Wielandt, of Terradyn Consultants, said the \$26,000 fee or the requirement to find and lease four additional spots would “handcuff” Community Housing, and said the 12 garage spaces provided were more than enough. He said Community Housing was willing to conduct a traffic and parking analysis to prove this once the building is occupied.

Cameron told the board the in-lieu fee would likely go toward the city’s sustainable transportation fund, where it could support several projects, such as making improvements to public infrastructure, improving bus stops, and creating bike shelters.

Ultimately, the board agreed to the waiver to 16 spots, and unanimously approved the project.



This apartment building at the corner of Valley and C streets would be demolished for a new apartment building proposed by Avesta Housing. (Portland Phoenix/Jordan Bailey)

Avesta

The board also unanimously approved 60 rental apartments proposed by Avesta Housing at 210 Valley St.

City Planner Andrew Tufts said the project is at the intersection of Valley and C streets and abuts the Florence House, a women’s shelter managed by Preble Street. There is another structure nearby, a single-family home, which will have to be demolished for the project.

Tufts said because of the unique frontage of the building, it will be five stories on most sides but will appear to be six stories on one street. The apartments will be on the second through fifth floors, he said. The ground level will have a parking garage with 40 spaces. There will be 24 bike parking spaces inside the building and six additional spaces outside.

To overcome a deficiency in landscape trees on the parcel, Avesta agreed to an in-lieu fee of \$22,000. Sam Lebel, a civil engineer from Acorn Engineering, said the site is on a third of an acre, with parking access on Valley and C streets. He said the \$22,000 fee would go towards the city’s Western Promenade Master Plan, likely to go towards community projects such as gardens, trails, a dog park, and other items.

The board unanimously approved the project, granting additional driveway waivers Avesta had requested.

Tim McNamara, president of the St. John Valley Neighborhood Association, was concerned the proposal wouldn’t actually be for workforce housing, which the association preferred over senior housing. He said he was concerned this would turn into housing more focused on social, medical, and mental health services, which “scares me as a neighbor.”

Catherine Elliot, a development officer with Avesta, said 80 percent of the units will be workforce, meaning there is an income restriction; the remaining 20 percent will be market rate.

Avesta, she said, provides various services in their buildings “to make sure those inside are successful.”

