

Redevelopment of Mercy Hospital site would add affordable housing in city

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This rendering provides a view of the proposed redevelopment of Mercy Hospital in the West End of Portland. The hospital plans to transition to its new Fore River campus, which could be ready as soon as the end of 2021. *Courtesy of NewHeight Redfern*

An early redevelopment plan for Northern Light Mercy Hospital's State Street campus released Wednesday calls for a mixed-use development that adds three buildings and includes up to 550 new housing units, with more than half designated for low- and moderate-income residents, according documents filed with the city.

The concept plan was submitted in support of requested zoning changes that, if approved as written, would permit the tallest of the new buildings to reach 85 feet along State Street, placing it in line with the height of the existing main hospital building, which stands at 87 feet. The plan also calls for increasing the allowable height to 45 feet for two other buildings on Winter Street.

The changes are necessary to make the project financially viable, the developers wrote in the 13-page document released Wednesday by the city.

The early stage document is the most detailed look yet at the future of the hospital campus, which dates to the early 1940s. It was sold in February for an unknown sum and is being phased out as Mercy plans to transition most medical services to an \$84 million complex being built on its Fore River campus that could be ready as early as the end of 2021.

The local development group NewHeight Redfern, which was selected by Mercy during a competitive process to buy the parcels totaling 3.5 acres, is also asking for zoning amendments that would allow the campus to become mixed-use and host a medical clinic, health club, grocery store, office and retail space, and self-storage services to make use of “dark” interior areas of the hospital building that are not suited to other uses, according to the concept plan, dated June 23.

“In developing these amendments, the team explored a number of options and alternatives,” the developers wrote in their 13 page submission to the city’s planning department. “In the end, balancing the team’s vision for the site, the city’s comprehensive plan goals and policies, and the economics of adaptively reusing this site led us towards this proposed set of amendments.”

One of the principal developers, Jonathan Culley of Redfern Properties, said previously that the affordable units would be set aside for people making between 80 percent and 120 percent of the area median income. According to the city, 80 percent of area median income for 2019 was \$52,100 for a single-person household and \$74,400 for a four-person household, while 120 percent of those median incomes was \$78,120 and \$111,600, respectively.

Ian Jacob, president of the West End Neighborhood Association, said he’s been kept up to date by the developers and expects to see more details emerge as the project progresses. Jacob said his members see the value in a mixed-use development and the creation of publicly available green space, where possible.



Mercy Hospital's historic building on State Street in Portland, photographed in February, will be redeveloped into a mixed-use complex with 550 housing units, according to plans submitted to the city.

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"We had an initial meeting with them when it was announced and they have been really great with us," Jacob said. "They understand the importance of this development as probably the largest development in a long time in the West End."

Jacob, who works in the architecture and design field, said as a matter of policy, the neighborhood group does not take a position for or against projects such as the hospital plan. But he pointed out that the 85-foot heights requested would be book-ended by the current hospital building and the existing affordable housing complex at 100 State St., which is quite high.

"The proposed infill on the State Street side is filling in that missing tooth of the street wall, and whether that works at 85 feet, it's a little too early to tell," Jacob said. "I think the greater thing is to keep it mixed use, because if 72-year-old Ethel needs something from the corner market ... she can just walk there."

The venture is a collaborative effort between NewHeight and Redfern, which separately have developed several projects in Portland, and also includes the affordable and low-income housing providers Community Housing of Maine and the Portland Housing Authority.

The NewHeight Group has done several upscale condominium projects, including the Luminato and 118 on Munjoy Hill. It's currently building the Verdante at Lincoln Park, which is next to the Luminato. Redfern, meanwhile, has built several market-rate rental housing projects here in recent years, including West End Place, Munjoy Hill Heights, the Hiawatha on Congress Street and 89 Anderson next to Kennedy Park in East Bayside.

The developers project they will spend much of 2020 seeking the zoning changes and amendments. Detailed designs for the complex would not begin until afterward, likely in 2021. The first in a series of public meetings about the project have not yet been scheduled, and more sessions with neighbors and neighborhood groups are expected.

"We have arranged to stay in close contact with the leadership of the three neighborhood associations to keep an open dialogue as development progresses," said Erin Cooperrider, a principal for the developer. "We are still in the very early stages of the project, and as buildings get designed, there will certainly be more conversations."

Although the documents do not contain any detailed renderings – it's too early in the process for design drawings – a map shows three new buildings that would surround the main hospital. The surface parking lot across from the existing emergency department entrance on Spring Street would be replaced with a large new structure that preserves the historic Smith House and garden at the corner of Spring and State streets, and fills much of the parcel's footprint.

The two buildings proposed along Winter Street would flank the old hospital building and wrap around toward the Morrison House, another historic property. Between them, the developers plan parking and some open space.

The developers also asked for an amendment to permit congregant care and intermediate care facilities at the development – changes that are also being sought by the Portland Opportunity Alliance, the plan said.

Already, the developers have met with some residents and more meetings are planned with the Parkside Neighborhood Association, the Western Promenade Neighborhood Association and the resident's council at 100 State Street, a complex of affordable housing units that abuts the current Mercy parking lot.

Mercy's transformation and move to the Fore River Parkway has been long in the making. When complete, it will conclude a chapter of the hospital's history that began in 1918, when the Sisters of Mercy opened a hospital at Congress and State streets to treat patients during the 1918 influenza pandemic. They moved into the current hospital building in 1941.