

Portland developer proposes housing for homeless women

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A Portland development group that bought a prime West End property last year has dropped plans for market rate housing and is proposing affordable housing, including rooms for homeless women in recovery from opioid addiction.

The Developers Collaborative submitted plans to convert a three-story brick building at 66 State St. into a rooming house with onsite staff and services for women struggling with opioid use syndrome. It would be staffed by Amistad, a nonprofit social service agency that operates two similar residential programs in the Portland area.

The \$8 million project also calls for the construction of a new, four-story building next door that would provide studio and one-bedroom apartments to low-income tenants, who are defined as earning no more than 60 percent of area median income.

Kevin Bunker, a founding principal of the Developers Collaborative, which bought the property from Catholic Charities last year for \$1.3 million, had originally planned to build mostly market rate housing on the site. The building's sale coincided with a boom in the

construction of high-end and luxury condos throughout the Portland peninsula, including some units selling for well over \$500,000 apiece.

But Bunker didn't want to move forward until Amistad, which is headquartered there, could find another location to serve its clients, most of whom have severe and persistent mental illness. And, over time, Amistad advised him on the design and programming for the new project.

"Do we really need 30 more condos in Portland?" Bunker said in an interview Monday. "There was an opportunity to do more. I could see what (Amistad was) doing firsthand and I appreciate their programming and came to respect them a lot."



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The proposal comes as the city plans to relocate its primary homeless shelter from the edge of the downtown to the Riverton neighborhood, while also looking to private organizations to provide housing for women, people recovering from substance abuse and others who now rely on emergency shelters.

"So far every conversation we have had about it has been positive," said Brian Townsend, executive director of Amistad. "(Bunker) is really being a benefactor here, more than a businessman."

The existing building sits at the corner of State and Danforth streets and used to be home to the St. Dominic's Parochial School for Boys.

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According to plans filed at City Hall, the Developers Collaborative is proposing to convert the existing structure into a rooming house with up to 38 single-occupancy rooms. A four-story building proposed for a rear parking lot would have 30 affordable apartments – 14 efficiencies and 16 one-bedroom units.

It's unclear how many rooming houses currently exist in the city. Neither Planning and Urban Development Director Jeff Levine nor interim Permitting and Inspections Director Keri Ouellette responded to a request for information Monday.

However, the proposed development appears to carve out a new niche in terms of Portland's so-called housing-first projects, which provide subsidized housing with staff support to allow homeless people to address underlying issues such as trauma or illness. Housing first is considered the most effective way to address chronic homelessness.



The proposed new building is at left. This rendering shows the view from Danforth Street. *Rendering Courtesy of Archetype Architects*

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Portland's existing housing first developments – Florence House, Logan Place and Huston Commons – offer studio apartments with bathrooms and kitchenettes, rather than single rooms. And the Community Housing of Maine's model uses scattered site apartments, rather than single rooms.

Townsend said it's too soon to say how many women could be accommodated at the rooming house or what kinds of services would be provided on site. He said those details would be worked out once the state's priorities – and funding streams – for addressing substance use become clearer.

Townsend said they are hoping to use housing vouchers to subsidize the rooming house, which would be available to women who qualify as long-term clients at the city-run shelter.

“We’re trying to figure it out by looking at the big picture to see what’s available and come up with something that is sustainable,” he said

Amistad already operates 18 supportive housing units in two buildings in Greater Portland for homeless women with substance use disorder. Townsend said that each house is run by a peer mentor, or someone who has the same life experience of struggling with substance use and living on the streets.

“It’s really been a success beyond what we hoped for,” said Townsend, even though the program loses money by keeping beds open for women who relapse. “It’s knowing that relapse is part of the recovery from the disease.”

Bunker, the developer, estimated rents at the rooming house would be \$750 a month, which lines up with voucher amounts for people earning up to 50 percent of area median income. The low-income apartments in the new four-story building could go for between \$750 to \$970 a month.

Bunker said the units in the new apartment building would be available to women who complete the first step of their recovery program at the neighboring rooming house.

“At that point there’s a place you can go where there is a regular apartment available and you can maintain access to the services,” Bunker said. “It’s this idea that real estate can help be a rehabilitative thing where people work their way up as their lives become better.”

Townsend said Amistad still needs to move its current operations out of 66 State St., where its administrative offices, social club and dining hall have been located since 1994. The nonprofit serves about 175 people, providing 60 breakfasts and 92 lunches a day, Townsend said last fall. It is still considering multiple sites, he said.

Initially anxious about what the sale of the State Street building could mean for Amistad, Townsend said the sale will present an unexpected opportunity for the nonprofit if all of the pieces fall into place.

“I think in a lot of ways we feel really fortunate,” he said.

Bunker said the first Planning Board meeting to discuss the project is scheduled for July 23. If approved in August, he said work could begin on the rooming house by the end of the year. And the construction of the new apartment building would be contingent on financing through the Maine State Housing Authority.

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