Watermark Development and JPNDC team up for affordable housing

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Is this the future for the development of affordable housing in Jamaica Plain?

A progressive for-profit developer has teamed up with an experienced social housing organization to build affordable homes on state-owned land.

On Nov. 8, 2017, the Massachusetts Department of Transportation (MassDOT) notified the joint venture of Watermark Development Inc. and Jamaica Plain Neighborhood Development Corp. of their designation to sell three properties taken over 50 years ago for the defeated I-95 on Call and Everett streets.

Watermark bought the three parcels for nearly $1.4 million. It will develop the largest parcel at 18 Everett St. and sell the two Call Street properties to the Jamaica Plain NDC for $1. The cost of land is a big impediment to low-income housing in Boston and this would make it easier for JPNDC to make the homes it builds more affordable.

These were part of a seven-parcel package on Everett, Call, Spaulding and Oakdale streets that MassDOT intended to sell to the highest bidder.

But at a raucous public meeting on June 7, 2017 hosted by MassDOT, the community pushed back demanding that all the land be made available for affordable housing.

"This is public land," said one participant.

Mark Boyle, assistant general manager of real estate at the MBTA was blunt: the MBTA needed cash and this land was money in the bank.

Leslie Bos, director of real estate for JPNDC, was equally blunt.

"We want you to give us the land for free so that we can build affordable housing," she said. "After the meeting, Lee [Goodman of Watermark] and I got to talking. He said 'I could buy those lots if they were packaged.' So we went to see Mark Boyle about our idea to increase affordability and get market rate."

On June 26, Bos and Goodman met with Boyle and explained their idea: combine the Everett Street parcel with the two smaller parcels at 77-85 Call St; those two parcels were separated by a city-owned lot that might be combined. The Everett Street land would subsidize the Call Street land; the two sites would support each other.

"I introduced the approach that JPNDC would build four two-family homes for first-time home buyers, eight units," Bos said. "We were keeping with the Plan JP Rox guidelines."

"Boyle liked the idea," Goodman said. "This was collaboration between the state, the city, Watermark and JPNDC."

When the RFP was issued on Aug. 9, 2017, the three properties were combined and the affordability requirement was increased in direct response to community comment. This depressed the land value and made it more affordable.

The asking price was $985,000. Watermark bid $1.4 million, beating out Urbanica and the Longwood Group.

Devin Quirk, Director of DND, was an active participant in the Plan JP Rox process.

"The DND parcel will have its own process," he said. "We look at every single way to get affordable housing done. This is a very exciting opportunity. We do public-private partnerships all the time but the most innovative part of this was the participation of the state."

Quirk agreed that Millennium Partners is doing something similar by its partnership with Asian CDC to make the affordability of its huge $1 billion Winthrop Square tower. Millennium and Asian CDC are looking at sites to build more housing for struggling Chinatown.

At a Jan. 16 abutters meeting, architect Elaine Scales describe her design of three three-unit wood frame buildings connected by an arcade on the large Everett Street lot. The upper floor condominiums would be reached by stairs and an elevator from the arcade.

A close student of existing street architecture in all her projects, Scales covered her three rambling structures with gables, turrets, bay windows and verandas to match the other big homes on the street. Each side is different.

"I don’t want my buildings to have a back," she said.

Set back from the street, the compound has a long drive, nine parking spaces and carefully landscaped grounds by Bellalta Design.

This being Jamaica Plain, there was bound to be something wrong and Lisa McHam of Rouseoke Avenue wasted no time to point it out.

"It’s too dense," she said. "Nine units is a lot. It’s putting a lot of cars on the road. Is this necessary for the second project?"

Goodman said it would not be economically feasible to decrease the number of units at Everett and still maintain the subsidy for the Call Street homes.

Watermark JPNDC have until June 30, 2018 to complete all due diligence in the purchase and sale agreement.

"No private developer would do this with anyone," Goodman said.

But Maplehurst, City Realty, Urbanica, Boston Properties and others looking to build housing in hot Jamaica Plain should watch this process closely; it might be the future.