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Senior housing project breaks ground amid protest, criticism

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Local, union construction workers protest outside the Nov. 23 groundbreaking at Shillman House. Picketers hold signs saying "Massachusetts Stimulus Money Should Go For Mass. Residents' Jobs" and "Shillman House: Units for Framingham, Jobs for New Hampshire." (Matt Rocheleau for The Boston Globe)

By Matt Rocheleau, Globe Correspondent

A \$42-million low- and moderate-income senior housing development, which includes \$2.9 million in federal stimulus funds, broke ground today amid picketing from local union construction workers who protested the project's hiring of non-union, non-local contractors and subcontractors.

The project's approval has also drawn criticism from some neighboring and local residents who feel the development is unnecessary; and some have expressed concern that Framingham residents, or relatives of town residents, will not be given the housing preference stated in the project's original proposal.

Located on Edmands Road, the Jewish Community Housing for the Elderly's (JCHE) Morton and Etta Shillman House will accommodate between 175 and 200 seniors in 150 one- and two-bedroom apartments, including 90 units reserved for low-income seniors and 60 units available at market rates.

President of JCHE Ellen Feingold said approximately 260 jobs will be created over the course of the 18-month construction project, and 92 percent of those jobs will go to workers from Massachusetts. The non-union general contractor, Dellbrook Construction, LLC, of Braintree, was hired because their bid for the project was \$5 million lower than the lowest bid from a union contractor, she said.

"We don't have another \$5 million to spend," on this project, Feingold said. "[The protesters] ought to be able to give us a break."

According to a hand-out provided by JCHE at the groundbreaking, "Dellbrook will pay all construction workers the prevailing wage based on the union pay scale, plus benefits."

However, picketers including David Borrus, council representative for the Pile Drivers Local Union #56 of the New England Regional Council of Carpenters (NERCC), said they believe the winning bid on the project was a dishonest

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estimate and question how Dellbrook could submit a bid \$5 million lower.

“We don’t believe you can do this work for that rate,” said Dorrus, a member of the Jewish Labor Committee.

“If everyone is bidding apples for apples, there should only be a difference of around \$500,000 or a million at most. Where is that \$5-million void coming from?,” said NERCC member Charles Ryan. “The only way they can do this is by not paying a fair wage.”

Dellbrook declined to comment directly, but, through JCHE spokeswoman Micahl Regunberg, the company’s vice president Michael Fish said “We wanted this job badly, and we priced it aggressively,” adding that they have gone through the bidding process in a fair, responsible and legal manner and will continue to do so.

Equipped with signs, banners and megaphones, around 200 electricians, plumbers, carpenters and other construction workers, the majority of them laid off, lined the entrance to the groundbreaking along Edmands Road.

Among them were two members of Ashland-based Carpenters Local Union #475 – Bill Williams of Milford, who has been unemployed for around one and a half years, and Tom Rowley of Natick, who has been jobless for around nine months.

“A lot of the stimulus money and federal money is being put into this project and no unions are working on this, no local Framingham or MetroWest guys at all,” Williams said.

Twenty subcontractors hired for the project are Massachusetts companies, while four are from out of state, including Multipro Wall Systems, LLC, of New Hampshire, said Regunberg.

Before the Monday morning protests outside the ceremonial groundbreaking, the project had been facing some local scrutiny, including concern over the need for the project.

Some feel the development is unnecessary because Framingham has already surpassed its requirement for 10 percent affordable housing under state Chapter 40B, and because there are several other low-income elderly housing developments nearby, which are not full.

However, the JCHE called the project “much needed,” and Feingold said she is confident they will be able to fill Shillman House.

“We’ve had over 600 people signed up on the list of low-income units since discussions of this project began,” when the property was purchased around six years ago, she added.

But abutters to the project, including 61-year-old Martin Levin, disagree on the project’s necessity.

“We looked at a lot of statistics and the question of need was very important,” Levin said. “The need for elderly housing is not here in Framingham. This is absolutely the wrong place.”

Though Framingham has met its 10 percent requirement for affordable housing, the town’s Board of Selectmen voted non-unanimously to grant the project approval through the Local Initiative Program, commonly referred to as a “friendly 40B” approval, which aims to have housing developers and municipalities work cooperatively on a certain affordable housing plan.

The project’s original proposal called for at least 50 percent of the housing to go to Framingham residents or relatives of people from Framingham, with a promise to reach 70 percent. However, Feingold said, in order to qualify for federal dollars needed to fund the project, the rate of the development’s seniors required to have Framingham connections was lowered to 30 percent.

“We really argued with [the federal fair housing office], but they rejected it,” Feingold said. But, based on those who have shown interest in housing so far, “we do believe there will be a higher percentage of Framingham residents,” than the minimum 30 percent.

There are currently 600 individuals and couples on the notification list, “the vast majority of which are Framingham residents,” said Regunberg. Though she did not know an exact percentage, she said it was above 50 percent.

But, what has also upset some local residents was that, according to Levin and other abutters, the town’s Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) did not supply adequate notice to the public of the project’s decrease to 30 percent from 50 percent of housing set aside for Framingham residents.

“They lowered it to 30 percent without a public hearing. Abutters, neighbors never got a fair hearing. We never got to prove our point,” he said.

According to ZBA Chair Philip Ottaviani Jr., however, approving the lowered residency rate was a procedural move, and the board had little say in the decision.

“It was disappointing. But, should the process have been started over completely from the beginning? I don’t think so,” said Ottaviani.

“This project has been a long, drawn out battle. There were lots of promises made [by JCHE], and I hope they keep their promises,” he added. “I still believe it’s going to be a good project.”

Board of Selectmen Chair Ginger Esty said it was “very disappointing” that the project was approved with a lowered Framingham residency requirement, but “I think the reality is that it will get to that [50 percent rate that was originally proposed].” And, “I think they are shooting for something around 70 percent.”

“I’ve been assured that they will be able to provide a high percentage of Framingham residents or people with a Framingham connection,” she added.

JCHE calls the Shillman House one of the state’s first low- and moderate-income housing developments to start construction using funds from the 2009 American Recovery and Reinvestment Act.

The project will also receive financial support from a range of other governmental agencies including MassHousing, Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development and \$75,000 from the town.

Tax credit investments were made by Brookline Bank and the Massachusetts Housing Investment Corporation. Substantial private support was received from Dr. Bob and Mao Shillman, the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Inc., other foundations, major gifts and hundreds of private individuals, said a JCHE press release announcing the groundbreaking.

The building will offer a dining program, computer center, fitness center, art studio, wellness center, bistro, intergenerational programs, and full elevator service. Shillman House has been designed in accordance with the Enterprise Green Community Standards and includes solar panels for heating, high-efficiency ventilation, cooling and lighting systems, Energy Star appliances, environmentally-friendly materials intended to improve indoor air quality, water-saving fixtures, and the recycling of construction waste material, the release said.

Shillman House is named after Morton and Etta Shillman, whose son and daughter-in-law, Dr. Bob and Mao Shillman, donated to the project on behalf of their mother who lived at JCHE’s Coleman House. In recognition of financial support from the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, the building site is named the Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Campus.

The application process for those seeking subsidized units will take place six months prior to occupancy as required by the US Department of Housing and

Urban Development (HUD) and other funding agencies, said the release.

Individuals and couples can be placed on the notification list by contacting shillmanhouse@jche.org. To secure a market rent unit through a refundable reservation deposit, call 508-788-0849, email shillmanhouse@jche.org or visit www.jche.org.



(Architect's rendering: DiMella Shaffer Associates)

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