

Community Preservation Committee
August 28, 2024
Norwood Senior Center- 275 Prospect Street
Hybrid Meeting Minutes

PRESENT

Catherine Walsh, Vice Chair
Joe Greeley
Cheryl Doyle
Julie Barbour-Issa
Patricia Griffin-Starr
Matt Lane
Deborah Holmwood

Kristen Phelps, Community Preservation Coordinator
Emily Manning, Recording Secretary

CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 7:00 PM

PUBLIC HEARING- COMMUNITY PRESERVATION ACT APPLICATION

Project: Affordable Veterans Housing at 20 Vernon Street

Applicant: Caritas Communities, Inc.

Representatives from Caritas Communities introduced themselves and explained the mission and business model of Caritas Communities to the audience. Greg Rittchen and Frank Connell, both of Caritas, explained how their affordable housing communities serviced homeless and near-homeless veterans. Jason Gilbert, Clear Path for Veterans New England, works closely with Caritas to provide services and support to veterans while living in a Caritas community. Mr. Rittchen explained the 20 Vernon Street project to the audience. Caritas is proposing to turn the existing commercial building at 20 Vernon Street into affordable housing for veterans, with on-site services. Since originally presenting the project back in January, their ask of the CPC has been lowered from \$1 million to \$800,000. Caritas has also been working closely with the Town and the working group focusing on this project to address community concerns. They are applying for the State's Fall Funding Round in October, which would cover a majority of the funding.

Ms. Walsh explained that CPC had received a revised application from Caritas and she opened up comments to members of the CPC. Ms. Doyle was curious why Caritas was not obtaining a bank loan for some of the funding. Mr. Rittchen explained that while they would obtain a bank loan, they were only able to get a loan on the portion of debt that they could cover with cash flow, which would not cover all closing and construction costs, which was why they were requesting CPA funding.

Mr. Greeley explained the formation of the project working group, which has representatives from the CPC, the Finance Commission, the Board of Selectmen, and the Manager's office. He

added that this group had supplemented the list of questions raised by the CPC and a comprehensive Frequently Asked Questions document was being developed for Town Meeting.

Sarah Sullivan, representative of the Finance Commission and a member of the working group, explained that the goal of the working group was to make sure Town Meeting members were well informed of the project. Mr. Lane echoed the purpose of the working group was to give members of the public as much information as possible, not to persuade in any direction. Ms. Sullivan was concerned about an increase in debts she observed when looking at Caritas financial statement from 2022. She was hoping to have some protections, notably a clawback agreement or something similar written into the contract. Mr. Rittchen was on board with potential protections for the Town in the agreement. He added that this would be a deed restricted property, and if any issues were to arise and Caritas needed to pull out of the property in the future, it would need to be turned over to a similar non-profit.

Teddy Mulvehill, former Veterans Service Office for the Town of Norwood, explained what he had seen in his role as Veteran Service Officer for over 20 years. He explained that at the hearing for this project in January, he stated that there were no homeless veterans living in Norwood. He clarified that he should have stated that there were no homeless veterans living on the streets of Norwood; they were unseen, living on couches with family members, or in cars. While these veterans were often employed, they were not able to afford their own housing. This project would make a difference in ongoing need for housing for these veterans. Ms. Walsh asked Mr. Mulvehill to speak to the services provided by Caritas for the veterans. He explained that having accessible, in-house services would be extremely helpful to those veterans in need.

Steve Konetchy, 3 Harrow Road, questioned why Norwood should “gift” money to Caritas for this project, and why Norwood should house veterans from other communities. Ms. Walsh explained that this project was eligible under the State guidelines for CPA funding. Mr. Greeley added that since CPC was enacted in 2016, they have not chosen to approve every single project that has been brought to them. Mr. Konetchy also questioned why Norwood was selected as the town for this project. Mr. Rittchen stated that Caritas was not “picking” on Norwood, but believed the Town’s beliefs aligned with theirs, and had seen the desire to build affordable housing.

Joe Sheehan, 269 Prospect Street, former member of the CPC, spoke in support of the project. He stressed the importance of providing affordable housing to veterans. He noted that this would be a one-time payment from the Town, with Caritas handling all maintenance and costs associated with owning the building.

Toni Eosco, 14 Endicott Street, expressed her concerns over the financial ask for this project. She stated that she had done extensive research on affordable veterans housing projects in other towns, but did not find one instance where the town provided as large of a sum of money for the project. She explained that Norwood did not receive a large amount of CPA funding from the State, and that this project would involve other communities. She questioned why Caritas was not providing their own money for this project. While she supported creating affordable veterans housing in Norwood, she wanted to see a lesser amount provided by CPA funds. She was also concerned about the lack of networking Caritas had done with the veterans in town. In response

to the statements by Mrs. Eosco, Ms. Walsh explained why the CPC chose to fund this project, and that out of all of the projects they had funded, only 9% of those were housing projects. Mr. Rittchen responded that the majority of the funding for this project was coming from the State, with approximately 12% of the funds coming from the Town.

Steve Brody, 102 Devon Road, questioned how much money Caritas received from the State and other sources to house veterans. Mr. Rittchen explained that the veterans housing was funded by VA vouchers offered by Boston Housing Authority. Ms. Walsh noted that the CPC funding would be a one-time payment, and the Town was not contributing to Caritas operating costs. Ms. Sullivan noted that this project would affect the Town's operating budget and the Finance Commission was working to figure out exact numbers, however the property owners would be paying property tax.

Steve Eosco, 14 Endicott Street, was curious how a homeless veteran in Norwood would go about receiving housing at 20 Vernon Street. Mr. Rittchen stated that Norwood residents would have preference with the Boston Housing Authority, where they would apply. Mr. Eosco also asked about the appraisal for the property. Ms. Walsh explained that the company they were originally working with was unable to complete the appraisal, and they were working with a new company, and would be completed before Town Meeting. Ms. Sullivan pointed out that there was a purchase and sale agreement for \$1.6 million.

Alan Slater, member of the Finance Commission, 116 Devon Rd., explained that months ago Caritas stated that local preference would be doubtful due to State guidelines, and was curious what had changed between then and this hearing. Mr. Rittchen stated that he had spoken with their VA representative who believed local preference was a viable option for this project. Gerri Slater, Town Moderator, 116 Devon Rd., noted that Boston Housing Authority was in charge of the housing vouchers and had a different stance on local preference, and that information should be cleared up before Town Meeting. Mr. Slater was also concerned about the price of the total cost for the project increasing significantly. Mr. Rittchen explained the reason for the cost escalation.

Jeff Sullivan, Norwood Record, was curious where CPA funding comes from. Mr. Greeley explained the process of obtaining CPA funding. Mr. Sullivan was also curious if there was a benefit to housing a homeless person, who on average cost the State between \$30,000-\$40,000 per year, which Mr. Connell believed there was.

Ms. Holmwood was curious who was paying the difference in the funding. She also wondered if Caritas had other sources of income for the acquisition of the property, besides the State. Mr. Rittchen explained that they would obtain a short-term loan, and were looking into private grant funding, but had not been successful so far. Ms. Holmwood was also curious if there would be transportation provided for the residents. Mr. Rittchen noted that they were hoping to get a Zip Car on the property, and Clear Path provided transportation.

Mr. Greeley asked if Caritas had a backup plan if this project were rejected by Town Meeting. Mr. Rittchen explained that they tried to have multiple projects going at the same time, in case one was to fall through. Mr. Greeley also explained a trip he had taken recently to a Caritas

veterans community in New Bedford, and explained how they functioned daily as well as the financial side.

Ms. Doyle asked Caritas what would happen if at Town Meeting, someone amended the motion to lower the funding. Mr. Rittchen stated that they would try and make it work if that happened. Ms. Walsh recommended working with the State on that issue beforehand.

Ms. Walsh explained that there was a meeting scheduled for September 4th, which would be open to the public, where the group would vote on whether to recommend the project to Town Meeting. Myev Bodenhofer, member of the Finance Commission, added that they would be voting on financial articles on September 23. Mrs. Slater, Town Moderator, explained that registered voters were able to register to speak at Town Meeting, regardless of membership status.

A motion to close the public hearing was made by Matt Lane and seconded by Cheryl Doyle. All members voted unanimously to close the public hearing and adjourn the meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at 8:54 PM

Minutes respectfully submitted by Emily Manning