

Willimantic Community Questions June 30, 2004 Community Forum

Group 1

1. *Why is the Common Ground project on Main Street?*

The project is located on Main Street because buildings (the Nathan Hale and the Hooker Hotels) are located there. Common Ground's plan responds to the long-standing management problems at the Hooker by turning the two buildings into attractive, well managed housing.

2. *Can they compromise on the number of units?*

While our current assumption is to redevelop the Nathan Hale and the Hooker into no more than 100 units of supportive housing, the plans have not been finalized.

3. *What services are they going to provide?*

Sue Andrews, a Columbia resident, is Common Ground's social work coordinator on site. She is responsible for arranging social, psychological, medical, self-help and recreational programs needed or requested by residents. She is working with the social service organizations in the community to see that building residents are linked to existing services.

4. *Is there a lack of parking?*

Other supportive housing buildings in Connecticut have found that no more than 10% of their tenants typically own cars and therefore a limited number of parking spaces are needed. Currently our plan calls for 14 parking slips. In the past, there were no parking spaces at the buildings. We realize that this is a major concern and are looking for ways to increase this number, and to work with the town on an overall plan to address downtown parking issues.

5. *Is CHFA locked into Common Ground?*

(Bruce Perry, CHFA representative: "CHFA and Common Ground are not "locked into" working with each other, but are committed to working together to improve the Hooker Hotel. Common Ground has signed a Management Agreement with CHFA to operate the Hotel on behalf of CHFA.")

6. *What happens to transient people that live in Hotel Hooker?*

They will continue to live in the hotel and have access to social services. In the future, the building will not be used for transient occupancy. Following renovation/reconstruction, tenants will be made up of current tenants and working people of limited means, including artists and entry-level workers.

7. *Can you make it mixed use? Students/elderly/disabled?*

The property will be mixed use – 100 units of supportive housing with retail businesses on the ground floor. Our focus will be on recruiting retail tenants who will draw students, town residents, those from the surrounding area and visitors to

Main Street. We are organizing a series of focus groups with ECSU students and discussions with local business operators and economic development officials to identify specific retail needs/opportunities to pursue.

Students, elderly and the disabled can also apply to live in the Hotel following renovation/reconstruction. To be eligible, prospective tenants must have annual incomes below \$25,850 for a single adult (2004 figure).

8. *Will you evict tenants involved in drug/criminal activity? What about security?*

Common Ground has engaged off duty Willimantic police to provide front desk and security coverage in the building. There are also house rules in effect to assure neighborly conduct in and around the building and to forbid drug/criminal activity. Common Ground will enforce the house rules against any tenant who violates them, and will pursue the appropriate course of action, including eviction and referral to other housing if the forbidden behavior is not corrected. We will work closely with the Willimantic police to address any suspected illegal activity.

10. *Will you pay taxes?*

Yes, we will pay taxes. Our research of other comparable supportive housing projects in the state indicates that this type of permanent housing pays from \$300 to \$550 per unit per year in taxes. Based on our current financing plan, our proposal is to pay approximately \$500 per unit per year, which would yield \$50,000 in annual taxes. The buildings currently pay approximately \$18,000 per year, combined, in property taxes.

11. *Is retail realistic?*

In our many meetings with the business community, we have heard that there is a strong need for quality retail businesses to strengthen Main Street. With the large student population in the area, businesses that cater to students will be our priority. Among the suggestions we've received are coffee shops; restaurants; clothing stores; ice cream stores and other such places to give Main Street more of a "college town" feel.

12. *How many people can live in one room? Do they check it?*

The rooms are single room occupancy – one person per room. We are "grandfathering" the 5 couples that currently live in the building. All future tenants will be single adults only. No families will be housed at the buildings, so there will be no additional demand on local schools.

13. *If this doesn't go through what will happen to the buildings?*

CHFA owns the buildings and has a responsibility to the State and to the town to see that they are redeveloped, and that existing tenants do not lose their housing.

14. *Has Common Ground ever done a project this big (70-100) in a business district this small (5 blocks)? If no, then how can you predict economic impact?*

Common Ground is currently redeveloping a building of a similar size in a community and downtown area of similar size in Newburgh, New York, in partnership with a local not for profit organization, Safe Harbors of the Hudson.

Group 2

15. *Why don't Common Ground staff live in Willimantic?*

This is Common Ground's first project in Willimantic. Our work until now has been concentrated in New York. The three experienced staff hired to operate the building on a day to day basis all live in eastern Connecticut.

16. *Why has the state not given \$16m to any development?*

The State has not given \$16M to this development. The \$16 million estimated cost for the project is an outside estimate of the cost of redeveloping the two properties, and is based on CHFA's average per unit costs of developing housing that involves significant reconstruction, environmental abatement and historic preservation. An actual development budget will be developed once plans for the buildings are finalized.

17. *What is the harm to moving to another location?*

Common Ground was asked to take over a troubled building and turn it into an asset that could assist in the redevelopment of Willimantic's Main Street. We presently have 60 (?) tenants, after relocating the tenants of the YMCA building into the Hooker. We were engaged by CHFA to do this work. They have made it clear that there must be a viable plan for the Hooker, so that it does not return to being a transient hotel, and a problem property. Our plan addresses the Town's and CHFA's concern for a positive, responsible use for the building. The question of moving the location is not one that Common Ground can address; it is not our decision as we do not own the building.

18. *Was there an active effort to market the buildings in question?*

CHFA bought the buildings after the Savings Institute acquired an option on the Hooker Hotel. Everyone's concern was to see that the building was responsibly managed and no longer a problem for the community and a bad environment for tenants. The prior owner had the buildings (the Hooker and the YMCA) on the market. The Receivership action against the prior owner made it necessary that an acquisition and management plan for the buildings be put together quickly so that they would not return to their previous use.

19. *Why was Common Ground chosen by CHFA rather than put it out to bid?*

(Bruce Perry, CHFA representative: "CHFA and the State considered this project to be an emergency situation and opted for Common Ground Community, a proven leader in developing and operating supportive housing and in turning around troubled properties.")

Group 3

20. *How does supportive housing work? Need for supportive housing in Willimantic?*

Supportive housing is permanent housing combined with social services for those who may need assistance: those with mental and/or medical disabilities, the elderly, the homeless – as well as lower income individuals. Supportive housing offers affordable accommodations as well as services such as links to counseling, job training and placement, medical needs and help with life skills like cooking and money management.

21. *Will this turn into a flophouse?*

No. Common Ground's plan is to rehabilitate the former Hotel Hooker and the adjoining Nathan Hale Hotel, from transient housing into no more than 100 units of permanent mixed income housing for working people and the former tenants of the Seth Chauncey Hotel and YMCA. The redevelopment will feature over 3,200 square feet of ground floor retail space.

22. *Economic impact*

Studies of supportive housing have found that the overwhelming majority of neighbors and neighboring business owners say that the neighborhoods looked better or much better than before the supportive housing projects were completed, a Property values also increased significantly.

23. *What of the consequences of displaced transients?*

Common Ground retained all of the tenants living in the building when the Receivership ended. The Receiver did evict some tenants, and others moved out once security was put in place. We understand that some of these former residents are now part of an encampment at the river. We are eager to work with other local agencies to explore ways to address this separate problem, of homelessness, in the community.

Group 4

24. *Don't we have enough social services already?*

Common Ground is not bringing additional social services to the community. We are bringing responsible property management and development expertise. Our intention is to work with existing social service providers in the area to provide needed assistance to building residents.

25. *Have selectman asked any local agencies to take it over?*

(Bruce Perry, CHFA representative: "No local agencies had stepped up to deal with the problems at the building. Once the State Attorney became involved, the State took over the process due to its complex, emergency level status.")

26. *We weren't told about this. Why?*

Common Ground made a presentation to the Board of Selection in January 2004 and there have been a number of articles. We also held a community forum in March to describe our work and plan for the buildings, and get community input. The process of our becoming involved in the building moved very fast because of the Receivership, and CHFA's purchase of the building while the State's Attorney was involved.

Group 5

27. *Why did Common Ground come to Willimantic?*

We were asked by CHFA to assist in the turnaround of a troubled property, the Hooker Hotel, which was having a terrible impact on downtown Willimantic. Common Ground had been meeting with CHFA about plans for a supportive housing project in Hartford when we were asked to consider a role in the Hooker Hotel.

28. *Why should we have housing on Main Street at all?*

Most successful downtown renewal projects involve creating a residential community as well as retail. There has been hotel-type housing for single adults on Main Street for generations.

29. *How will this help bring middle class (customers) back to Main Street?*

Ground floor retail, and renovated, well managed buildings, will add to a more attractive and vibrant Main Street.

30. *Will other communities get involved in this kind of project?*

The State of Connecticut is a leader in developing supportive housing as a solution to homelessness and a way of revitalizing underutilized properties. There is a Statewide goal to create 10,000 new units of supportive housing in communities throughout the State during the next ten years.

31. *Why didn't the selectman who went to NYC in March tell us the whole story?/Why did they give us the wrong info?*

The selectmen who joined us for a tour of our buildings and met with our property managers were given the same information about the project that we have provided consistently. You will have to address this issue with that board separately.

32. *How will you deal with people who don't qualify for your apartments (income, drug use, etc.)?*

We will refer them to other housing.

Group 6

33. *We need businesses not agencies. There are 14 empty storefronts. Why not focus on bringing in new business?*

It's our belief that you can't attract high quality retail stores until the blighting influences of the Hotel and Nathan Hale are addressed. We are also following up on suggestions on the types of retail that are needed downtown and identifying possible retail tenants.

34. *How could we turn down use of buildings for housing with retail space on street level?*

There are some opponents to the project that would prefer an alternative use to this project. However, based on our studies and that of other groups, well run supportive housing provides quality residences for those needing affordable housing and services, and improves the appearance and economic climate of neighborhoods.

35. *Given the history of the building, (the hotel) isn't this a better option?*

The current use of the building is residential. Improving the overall appearance of the building and creating viable retail space will further benefit the community.

36. *There is \$16 million on the table to renovate the buildings. If a developer came up with that much, it would be good-but how can we turn this down?*

See answer to #34

Group 7

37. *How many new people moving/living in downtown?/How many people are living in the Hooker Hotel?/How many will move?*

The proposed plan is for 100 units of permanent mixed income housing. Those currently living in the Hotel (60 tenants) will remain, and the remaining units will be rented to working people of limited means, including artists, entry-level workers and others interested in living close to downtown businesses.

38. *What plans/means to attract mixed income singles? No children?*

The rooms are for single room occupancy only. Marketing for these apartments will be focused on Willimantic residents and major employers in the area, including UCONN, ECSU and the casinos.

39. *Who else is involved besides Common Ground/CHFA?*

Besides local social service providers assisting tenants with their special needs and the local government's involvement, there are no other outside organizations working with Common Ground Community and CHFA.

40. How does this project fit with Renaissance/Arts and Music energies? What are the plans for partnership with these efforts?

There is not yet a direct relationship with the arts/music renaissance, though some current tenants are artists and musicians. We look forward to building relationships with the music and arts communities.

41. What is the average residency/length of stay?

The hotel is being rehabilitated from transient housing into permanent mixed income housing. There are many residents who have been living in the building for over a decade. Though it is planned that all current tenants will remain, we expect that some will eventually move to other housing.

Group 8

42. What plans for those who can't/wont' live at the Seth Chauncey? More/worse homelessness.

To date, all of the previous tenants have remained since we arrived and introduced our new tenant guidelines/house rules.

43. Is there a waiting list?

There is no waiting list for new tenants.

44. Where does the money for the project come from?

An exact development budget will be developed once architectural plans are finalized. The project will be financed through CHFA's Supportive Housing Pilots Initiative (a program for special set-aside of low income housing credits, bond funding, rental subsidies and social service funds for supportive housing.) In addition, we will use the Historic Rehabilitation Tax Credit program.

45. Where are the contractors from?

Our goal is to work with the local labor force and local contractors. (Note: the general contractor we chose to do some immediate improvements to the Hooker Hotel -renovate the community room, and security/front entry is Andrew Nelson, a local contractor. His staff includes workers from Willimantic. We have employed other local contractors including an electrician, plumber and HVAC contractor. We have solicited bids through Investor's Management Association located on Main Street, Willimantic).

46. What are the residency requirements?

Marketing of these apartments will be focused on Willimantic residents and major employers in the area, including UCONN, ECSU and the casinos. Students, elderly and those disabled can apply to live in the Hotel. To be eligible, prospective tenants must have incomes below \$25,850 for single adults (2004 figures). Those from other communities are eligible to live in the building as well, though our marketing efforts will be focused on Willimantic.

Group 9

47. *Why can't others bid on the building?*

The buildings are State property, and the State controls the process governing the disposition of their property.

48. *Why not call for proposals (R.F.P.'s) for development of the properties?*

(Bruce Perry, CHFA representative: "Due to the fast-moving situation, with the building in receivership and the owner having given an option to purchase the building, CHFA needed to make a decision quickly and selected Common Ground because of its reputation and expertise").

49. *How about scattered sites for supportive housing?*

There are successful examples of scattered site housing projects, but delivering supportive services is more challenging that way.

50. *What happened to people who got evicted?*

Tenants were evicted by the court appointed receiver before we took over the building. We do not have any information about their status. Also see #23

51. *Why not include low-income families as well as singles?*

Our focus is to provide the single adults living at the building and other single adults with safe and good quality affordable housing, and the community with an attractive, well-managed building that contributes to the renewal of downtown. Typically, downtown residential buildings have catered to single adults, not families. We also understand that there are concerns in the community about adding new students to local schools, and that housing for single adults is needed in the community.

The following groups identified the assets and obstacles of the town and Common Ground's proposed project.

Group 10

Assets

Environment – community spirit

Diversity of people/community

Buildings

Higher end facilities – resource/ideas

River

Strong faith in the community

Third Thursday – Grass roots project

Safe environment

Transportation

Victorian homes

Obstacles

Lack of communication efforts
Governing body not in touch with grass roots efforts
Loitering
Employment opportunities-lack of
Lack resources for stronger social services – vice versa?
Substance use – perception/reality?
Perception we have “poor people” – negative
Apathy of large percentage of community
Them people? How does that sound?
Lack of sincere listening to each other!!

Who will do the work?

Common Ground
Small business development
Individuals in community – business owners
Community/towns who have or area experiencing same problems

Group 11

Willimantic

Assets

People
Empty Main Street

Common Ground

Good track record
Good services

Obstacles

Prejudice
Misinformation

Not local
Not known
Not trusted

Long history of inaction: by owner, by town

No other volunteers

Good Ideas:

U. Connecticut Dairy Barn

*Affordable commercial rental space for small business to come to Main Street

Who will do the work?

Townspople
Tenants

Experienced
Local Staff