

Willimantic Community Questions
July 22, 2004 Community Forum

Group 1

1. Is [the plan] a done deal?

The specifics of the plan have not been finalized. CHFA has purchased the Hooker Hotel and Nathan Hale Hotel, and has made it clear that it is looking for a comprehensive downtown plan to determine the best uses of all the under-utilized properties. CHFA has made it very clear, however, that there needs to be a viable plan for the Hooker – and that the tenants living in the building will be appropriately provided for in decent housing.

2. What is the impact on soup kitchens? Where will the residents eat?

The renovated apartments will all have their own kitchenettes, so the people who live in the building will be able to prepare their own food. Right now, because the existing common kitchens are inadequate, the tenants are often forced to rely on the soup kitchen.

3: How will discipline to unruly people occur?

We maintain a very safe building: we have on-site security (which will soon be there twenty-four hours a day), guests are expected to be appropriate in their conduct, and the house rules require our tenants not only to pay their rent in a timely way, but also to be respectful neighbors.

4. Will immigrants be allowed to reside there?

Immigrants will certainly be able to live in the building, but they must be legal immigrants because the financing for the building comes from public sources. We will verify people's legal status for being in the country, as well as for working or receiving benefits.

5. Will there be on-site social services?

There will be on-site services, though we don't know yet just what their nature will be. We are working with the other social service agencies in the community to see what gaps exist: there are many programs that we can collaborate with and we don't want to be redundant. We'll add those services that our tenants need but are not being provided by existing agencies.

6. Who pays for social services? What does "free of cost" mean?

The funding for the social services for the building will come from state, and possible federal, agencies. There is no charge to the tenant to meet with a caseworker or to participate in a counseling session or an activity in the building.

7. Could you explain the process from homeless to working? Who pays?

Typically, we find that most people who have stable housing are very eager to work and to be involved in a purposeful activity. We link people with existing training programs or assist them finding work. We develop contacts and relationships with local employers to place people into appropriate jobs.

8. What happens to those persons who are evicted?

This is a very serious and difficult question. We will evict someone if they refuse to pay the rent or are involved in illegal activities. We try to avoid this situation by working closely with our tenants – it really is a last resort. If we are forced to evict someone, we will refer him or her to other housing.

9. Do you need special permits or licenses for this program?

We aren't required to have any licenses or special permits for this type of housing because it's not an institution. It's an apartment building with services that are available for tenants who wish to use them. That's one of the things that makes supportive housing such a successful model: it really fits into neighborhoods, because it's not an institution.

10. Can the courts mandate a placement in your building?

The courts cannot mandate a placement. We have tight control over the intake process. We want to make sure that everyone who is applying to live in the building is going to be a good tenant, a reliable tenant, and is going to be a respectful neighbor. So we screen out those who are really not at the point of living independently or being a good neighbor.

Group 2

11. How close are the renovations going to be in repair to historic nature?

Both buildings are in poor quality, though they could be placed on the National Register of Historic Places. We plan to restore the Nathan Hale completely in terms of its historic character. Because the Hooker Hotel is in very poor condition structurally, it may make sense to demolish it and rebuild a building that will match the Nathan Hale. We are studying the trade offs—restoration versus demolition and new construction.

12. Why, when the project was moving forward, did CHFA agree to consider other locations for supportive housing?

My understanding is that, in June, CHFA was approached by the Board of Selectmen and asked to consider other locations. It wasn't CHFA's idea – it came from the Selectmen, I believe. Is that correct, Bruce?

(Bruce Perry, CHFA representative: “Yes.”)

13. Where are the people going to live during renovations?

The beauty of this plan is that the Nathan Hale can be renovated first and, when that's completed, the tenants who are now in the Hooker Hotel can be moved into their new homes. After that, the Hooker structure would either be demolished and built anew or restored. Right now, we are doing our best to improve the living environment of the tenants. We have just signed a contract with a local contractor to improve the community room and the security station and entrance.

14. In keeping with the vision of the city of Willimantic, what does Common Ground feel appropriate for the retail on the first floor? What types of businesses does Common Ground consider appropriate?

We've been meeting with local business people and others in the community, including the Chamber [of Commerce], to get a feel for the business needs that the community has identified. And what we hear consistently are uses that will attract the students to come downtown and shop downtown, as well as uses, for instance, for the local arts community. We have heard that these types of business activity would help make Willimantic a destination.

15. Will there be a plan for larger efficiency apartments (2 bedroom apartments)?

We are planning this housing to be for single people only, not for families. There's a long tradition in communities like Willimantic and cities like New Haven and Hartford where single people frequently live downtown above storefronts. It's less common to find family housing there. That tradition is part of what's driven our thinking about creating housing for single people living downtown.

Group 3

16. Is there a current vision for Willimantic? If so, what is it for Main Street?

That's the big, important question of the hour. I believe people here can give more specifics, but the Selectmen recently created a task force to study this issue and create a report to shape the direction of planning for Main Street. That vision is being developed by citizens of the community.

17. Do you need to have a job in order to live there?

The current tenants will remain there by rights of their already existing tenancy. Any of the new tenants I mentioned, the forty apartments that would be created in addition to the ones that are occupied right now, will be for working people. Not people who are seeking social services, but people who are employed in the local area. We've spoken to Eastern, the casinos, and the larger employers to get an understanding of the housing needs of their single work force, and we believe that there is quite a need for housing for single adult people in the area.

18. There are those of us who agree with Common Ground and think it's wonderful; but what about the opposition?

Let me describe what I understand the opposition to be. There is, I think, a deep concern – a skepticism given the terrible history of this building – that anything that we propose will just be a repeat of what's been there in the past. There's going to be a building that continues to be a blight on Main Street, that continues to provide poor housing, that continues to discourage businesses from being on Main Street, that continues to perpetuate an image of Willimantic that's negative. I believe that's fundamentally the opposition. And it's our job to understand peoples' frustration and real heartbreak over how that building past has affected the community in the past and to convince those who are opposed that we mean what we say, we've done what we are saying we'll do here, and that we'll be held accountable to manage this building properly.

I think maybe we could add one thing, as well. I think some of the opposition is looking at the future of Main Street and thinking that having a social service-related use on Main Street at a time the community wants to change its image can only be a hindrance. And I think one of our tasks is to demonstrate that we can be part of a new vision for the downtown, that part of what we do is turning things around.

Group 4

19. Would that exclude someone who is on Social Security Disability and will you have handicapped accessible apartments?

In the future, if, for instance, one of our existing tenants moves to another community, we would replace that tenant with someone who is able to live independently, able to follow the house rules, and is on a fixed income to the extent that the we have a rent subsidy or some way of assisting in paying rent. The buildings will comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act standards, so apartments will be accessible to the disabled.

Questions from the Floor

20. If someone has to go to a nursing home, on a temporary basis, how long will we keep the apartment open?

We work through these situations very much on an individual basis. Normally, in the case where someone is in failing health or frankly terminally ill, our practice is to bring home care systems to the building. It's not common for people to go into nursing homes if they need 24-hour nursing care. If someone is going for a rehabilitative episode, we will help them find an apartment when they return.

21. How are you helping people with small businesses?

Doug could probably speak to you on whatever small business resources would be available in the community, but we'll have over 3,200 feet of retail space and are absolutely looking to work with multiple entrepreneurs to create businesses to occupy the space. So we would be very open to talking to you. In fact, we're hearing from a lot of people that we really should focus on the retail as soon as possible, so if you would like to set up a time to meet...

(Doug Murphy, Chamber of Commerce: "I'm Doug Murphy and if anyone wants to open a small business, sit down and talk with me. That's what my job is. That's what Willimantic is all about . . . I've been talking about this for five years: I would like to see this room become one room where everyone is working as a community. . . .[T]onight's a good example of what could be if people work together.")