

Affordable Housing Project Moves Toward Approval

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The Falls Church Planning Commission voted 5-2 on March 15 to recommend approval of a special exception for the construction of The Wilden at 350 South Washington Street. The decision, which culminated the four hour session, clears the way for the City Council to approve the 66 unit senior affordable housing project on second reading next Monday, March 22.

Planning Commission Chair John Lawrence and Commissioner Rob Meeks voted against the exception and earlier were joined by Commissioner Ruth Rodgers in supporting a motion, introduced by Mr. Meeks and seconded by Ms. Rodgers, which would have recommended against Council approval of the project. That proposal was defeated by a 4-3 vote.

Commissioner Lindy Hockenberry led the opposition to Meeks' motion, saying it was a disservice to kill the project at the Planning Commission level. She stated that she felt The Wilden is a very good project which in the long run would bring about many other development opportunities that would otherwise be lost.

Commissioner Michael Kearney concurred, stating he was comfortable with The Wilden's financial model, although he expressed some skepticism that the project would come to fruition. Commissioner Melissa Teates saw the building as essential to improving the streetscape along South Washington and two adjacent sites on nearby Annandale Road. She noted that when the restaurant opens in the Tax Analysts building across the street from the project it would send a positive message for patrons to see the construction in progress. "I'm ready to take a leap of faith to get construction started down there."

Commissioner Russell Wodiska stated that he had come to the meeting thinking that he would vote against the project but that a lot of the questions he'd had had been answered. Although expressing concern that the City was "putting all its affordable housing eggs in one basket", he joined Ms. Hockenberry, Ms. Teates, and Mr. Kearney in voting down Mr. Meeks' motion.

Following the vote, Falls Church Housing Corporation CEO Carol Jackson said, "We are obviously humbled and thrilled about the Planning Commission's 5-2 vote."

Much of the earlier discussion focused on the need to start work on the project by mid-summer. If construction is delayed and the building has not received a certification for occupancy by December 31, 2011, essential tax credits will be lost.

However, occupancy will be contingent on 38 parking spaces being provided at 360 South Washington. The adjacent building currently is owned by Thomas Sawner who has signed a non-binding letter of intent to sell the structure to developer Bob Young, who intends to build an office building with a parking garage on the site. In effect, the two buildings will have to be constructed concurrently in order for the required parking to be available on schedule.

Mr. Lawrence asked the status of the \$2 million dollar loan earlier advanced to Mr. Sawner. Assistant City Manager stated that three quarters of the amount had been paid back to the General Fund.

Ira Kaylin, a candidate for City Council, spoke against the project's loan arrangements, stating, "Everyone seems to be taken care of here except the taxpayers." Mr. Kaylin estimated they would lose \$1.4 million dollars and called the plan a very poor financial transaction for the City.

Ms. Hockenberry and Mr. Lawrence also are running for Council.

Relevant documents are available for review at the City's website.

(<http://www.fallschurchva.gov/Content/Government/BC/PC/PC%202010/March%2015,%202010/PCMeeting03152010.aspx?&cnlid=3228>)