

Brattleboro Reformer

New subsidized housing proposed for former Austine campus



The Wheeler House on the former Austine School for the Deaf campus in Brattleboro is expected to be razed to make way for a new apartment complex predominantly serving low-income elderly residents. Photo by Mike Faher - Special to the Reformer

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By Mike Faher, Special to the Reformer

BRATTLEBORO — It's been nearly six years since Tropical Storm Irene's floodwaters swept through Vermont.

But Brattleboro housing officials are still recovering, with the latest evidence being a new apartment complex proposal at the former Austine School campus.

The two-story, 20- to 25-unit building is considered "phase two" of a multiyear, multimillion-dollar effort to move residents out of a floodplain in West Brattleboro. And the building's proposed location will be a good fit for residents and for Brattleboro Housing Partnerships, said Executive Director Christine Hart.

"It's really great to be able to say, 'This is it, folks — we think we've got the place,'" Hart said.

The new housing proposal, which was announced Tuesday, is the product of two unrelated events.

One was the 2014 decision to close Austine School for the Deaf due to enrollment declines and financial problems.

Brattleboro's Winston Prouty Center for Child and Family Development, which had been seeking space to expand, purchased the 177-acre Austine campus in early 2016. Winston Prouty is now looking to sell portions of the property, with an emphasis on non-profit organizations and "other community uses."

The other event was Irene, which caused widespread damage in August 2011. In Brattleboro, the storm's floodwaters overwhelmed the Melrose Terrace housing development, where 60 of the 80 apartments sustained damage.

Brattleboro Housing Partnerships repaired Melrose, but officials also began looking for a new home for the property's senior and disabled tenants. Many have ended up at Red Clover Commons, a new 55-unit, \$16 million complex off Fairground Road.

But Red Clover can't accommodate all of Melrose Terrace's residents. Hence the new subsidized affordable housing planned for Winston Prouty's campus off Maple Street, not far from Red Clover.

Officials have zeroed in on two parcels totaling 2.8 acres at the bottom of the campus, near Interstate 91. Brattleboro Housing Partnerships and Burlington-based Housing Vermont are partnering to develop the property, and Hart said Housing Vermont has an option to buy the land from Winston Prouty.

The project is in its early stages. Hart said an architect should be on board soon, but funding has not yet been lined up for a project that will cost an estimated \$3 million to \$4 million and will take two to three years to develop.

Officials will have to undertake an environmental study and must pursue local and state permits for the new building. A historical assessment also is required before officials pursue plans to raze a building known as the Wheeler House to make way for the new apartments.

Hart said she also intends to work with local residents to address any concerns they may have.

"We're very well aware that we're not building in a vacuum," she said.

However, she believes she has found the right site for apartments that will serve low-income, predominately elderly tenants. The proximity to Brattleboro Housing Partnerships' most recent addition is a major reason why.

"We really wanted to get as close as we could to Red Clover, because that's really set up as the central focus point for our support-service programs," Hart said. "This makes that very easy. We own our own van - we could easily bring people to Red Clover and back."

She and Chloe Learey, Winston Prouty's executive director, also are talking about the possibilities of shared programming between the apartment building's older residents and younger people affiliated with Winston Prouty and other campus tenants.

"There are definitely lots of places around the country that have talked about the benefits of different populations and different ages interacting," Learey said. "It's a bright spot on the horizon for us to think about."

She added that Winston Prouty sees Brattleboro Housing Partnerships as a good partner in finding new uses for the former Austine property.

"To revitalize this campus is the vision, and this fits perfectly with that vision," Learey said.



A sign marks the entrance to the 177-acre Winston Prouty campus in Brattleboro, formerly home to the Austine School for the Deaf. Photo by Mike Faher - Special to the Reformer

If the new housing proposal becomes reality, there will be no more tenants remaining at Melrose Terrace. And given the property's flood-prone location, Hart believes it should never again serve as housing.

In fact, Brattleboro Housing Partnerships is seeking final approval for a \$3.2 million federal disaster-mitigation grant to demolish 11 of the Melrose buildings; widen the waterway; and install a box culvert on a nearby bridge.

That work, Hart said, "will make Melrose a really terrific place for storm storage - water storage in the event of a flood of any size."

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<http://www.reformer.com/stories/new-subsidized-proposed-for-former-austine-campus,514745>