

The Herald News

Fall River Housing Authority tables decision on Section 8 vouchers

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FALL RIVER — The Fall River Housing Authority Board voted to table the issue on whether 150 project-based Section 8 vouchers should be awarded to the potential buyer of Riverview Towers, Westin Associates, which was the lone respondent to a request for proposal that FRHA's interim Executive Director Tom Collins determined did not meet the requirements of the RFP or HUD requirements.

The issue will be revisited in the monthly meeting in February.

But dozens of Riverview residents, mostly elderly or disabled, showed up in buses before the meeting at FRHA headquarters on Morgan Street, waving protest signs asking to save their homes. About 10 residents, housing activists and developer Michael Packard, of Westin, spoke in support of the vouchers and keeping Riverview available for low-income residents.

Resident Linda Mae Pettily, a member of the tenant association, told the housing board that she's lived and worked in Fall River all her life.

"I grew up here, I worked jobs here since I was 13 years old," Pettily said. "I worked all my life and ended up with nothing, so looking for a home isn't the easiest thing to do, or an apartment, as many of us well know."

The issue Monday night for the housing board, said Collins, was whether or not to accept Westin's proposal in the RFP to obtain the 150 new project-based Section 8 vouchers.

Westin was the lone submitter.

"We did an analysis of that proposal that was submitted, and we looked at the items that we asked for and the response," Collins told the crowd.

Collins said there were five to six items that required a response from Westin that were "not included, or sufficiently included, in the proposal submitted to us."

Several other advocates spoke on behalf of awarding the 150 project-based vouchers to Westin, including George Smith, the president of the Bristol County Chapter of the Massachusetts Senior Action Council, expressing concern about the loss of Riverview Towers as an affordable place to live for low-income senior citizens.

“Despite what many may think, there is a higher proportion of seniors living in poverty in Fall River than the statewide average,” Smith said.

Packard addressed the board, acknowledging Collins’ assertion that his RFP responses appeared inadequate to the interim executive director, saying he may not agree but there was “gray area that we both might be right.”

“But what I’d like to say to you tonight is I’m committed to working with you, with the city and all the (stake)holders in this process to come to an equitable solution we can all work with,” Packard said.

Michael Kane, of the Massachusetts Alliance of HUD Tenants, who has helped the residents organize, said without the project-based vouchers, “more than half of the building will be displaced.”

While listening to the comments from those in attendance, FRHA Commissioner David Underhill, who represents FRHA residents, said he wasn’t prepared to act on Collins’ recommendation to reject Westin’s proposed RFP.

“I don’t know enough about it, I need to know more,” said Underwood.

The vote was unanimous to table the issue.

Last week, the tenants delivered a letter requesting a meeting with Mayor Jasiel Correia II along with more than 200 signatures from Riverview Towers residents. Correia said publicly he doesn’t support the project in its present form, including an allocation from the city’s HOME program through its federal Community Development Block Grant allocation.

A tenant association organizer, who asked not be named, said the group has not had a response from the mayor’s office at this time.

Receiving the 150 project-based vouchers — to be used exclusively by housing recipients at Riverview Towers — is a major element in the sales deal that would see a mix of low- to moderate-income with some market-rate units in the future.

Collins said previously that the Housing Authority has been grappling with replicating project-based housing after the closure and demolition of Watuppa Heights, and that the project-based vouchers could be used in an alternative project in another community.

For the past 40 years, Riverview Towers, located on Milliken Boulevard, was under contract with the Massachusetts Housing and the state Department of Housing and Community Development.

Westin, the state's designee in the sale, has filed an affordable housing finance application with MassHousing and DHCD.

Michael Dion, executive director of the city's Community Development Agency that oversees the HOME program, said there's been a lot of confusion regarding the project and the proposed \$1.6 million that the city is proposed to supply, including an assertion by the tenant association in their letter to Correia that Westin was only asking for \$200,000 in funding from the city.

"In all our communications, they have been talking about \$1.6 million," said Dion, referencing an email from a Westin representative that identifies the project's funding from the city HOME program.

Correia has also indicated that's he's not interested in investing the city's housing funds to the Riverview project.

"Our contention is the application is not favorable," Dion said.

Dion, who attended Monday night's FRHA meeting, provided a copy of the email to The Herald News from Westin.

Tenants, many of whom have lived at the 200-unit high rise for several decades, have expressed fears of losing their homes at Riverview Towers.

If the deal falls through, the building could be sold for market-rate housing.

Under the law, the buyer would be required to limit rent increases to 3 percent a year for three years after March 2018 when the contract with the state expires. After three years, the building would be converted to market-rate units.

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