

3,000 Worcester Apartments Now Planned Ahead Of New Affordability Law

Worcester councilors will continue to debate inclusionary zoning. Meanwhile, developers are getting projects in before the law takes effect.

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The developer WinnCompanies is planning to convert the former Worcester Boys Club into 80 affordable, age-restricted units — one of two affordable projects in Worcester's booming downtown-area. (Neal McNamara/Patch)

WORCESTER, MA — In a flurry two weeks ago, two developers submitted plans for three major residential projects in downtown Worcester and the Canal District with close to 700 new units spread across them.

Each of the three buildings — two backed by the developer Foresight Capital, a third by the developer Quatterra — will include only market-rate units: apartments that will cost as much as the developer thinks the market can bear.

Those new developments were introduced just before the Worcester City Council is set to adopt a new inclusionary zoning law that will require developers to set aside a certain number of units as affordable. Proposals that come in ahead of the council adopting an inclusionary zoning ordinance will likely not be subject to it, including the new Foresight and Quatterra developments.

Yvette Dyson, the executive director of Worcester Common Ground, said Worcester has already "missed the boat" on using inclusionary zoning on many new buildings either planned or under construction, and urged the city council to act quickly.

According to Worcester's Executive Office of Economic Development, there are close to 3,000 units under construction or planned in the downtown and Canal District areas. Of those 3,000, just 163 units across two developments will be set aside as affordable — and about half of those units are planned for the former Worcester Boys Club at Lincoln Square and will only be for people

over age 55. There are also four other projects with a combined 781 units whose mix of affordable versus market-rate units have not been determined yet.

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The Worcester City Council's Economic Development Committee, chaired by District 1 Councilor Sean Rose, held a hearing Tuesday on the inclusionary zoning law proposal. The hearing drew a large crowd of local residents and members of the business community. The meeting, held 90 minutes before the start of Tuesday's full council meeting, drew so many speakers that Rose decided to continue it to a later date with no formal vote on the current inclusionary zoning proposal. The proposal has been brewing in front of councilors since May.

Peter Dunn, the director of the economic development office, outlined the city's current proposed inclusionary zoning ordinance at the hearing:

- Requires any new project with at least 12 units to set aside 15 percent of the total number of units as affordable for anyone earning 80 percent or below of the area median income — or, 10 percent of units as affordable for anyone earning 80 percent or below of the area median income. Developers could also mix the affordability levels.
- Deems that affordable units cannot exceed 30 percent of a renter or buyer's gross income, as set by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development.
- Requires developments subject to the ordinance maintain affordability levels for 30 years.
- Allows developers to avoid the ordinance if they make a payment equal to 3 percent of the construction project value. The payments will go toward the city's Affordable Housing Trust Fund.
- Provides zoning relief to developers who adhere to the ordinance, allowing them to exceed density restrictions in any given area.

But many who spoke Tuesday want the ordinance to be more favorable to low-income renters. Specifically, members of the Worcester Together Affordable Housing Coalition has asked for at least 5 percent of all units in new developments be affordable at the 60 percent AMI level. The coalition also

wants at least 2.5 percent of all 60 percent AMI units to be accessible for the disabled.

A demonstration at Worcester City Hall in September over inclusionary zoning. (Neal McNamara/Patch)

Zoom out of the downtown area, there are another 3,000 units either under construction or planned across the rest of the city, according to an estimate by the Carpenters Local 336 union, which tracks local construction activity.

Those farther-flung projects include, for example, [a 90-unit hotel conversion](#) off Lincoln Street, a redevelopment [in Great Brook Valley](#) and a planned Worcester Housing Authority redevelopment of [the Lakeside Apartments](#) — which could include the addition of market-rate units.

The union also tracks subsidies for projects, including tax-increment financing and grants from the city's new [Affordable Housing Trust Fund](#). The union is pushing for a "responsible" approach to development, combining an increase in affordable units with more oversight of developers who are getting tax incentives. For example, the SOMA development near Polar Park [has been warned by the city](#) to do better at hitting diversity hiring targets — or risk forfeiting a tax incentive plan.

"We believe we are facing a perfect storm type scenario as construction projects move forward. We are currently tracking nearly 6,000 units of housing being developed in Worcester over the next couple of years," Carpenters Local 336 Regional Manager Dave Minasian said. "Much of this development is being subsidized by taxpayers, and a growing part of these projects will have direct local subsidies either through tax increment financing, ARPA, Affordable Housing Trust funds or Community Preservation Act grant dollars."

Speakers at Tuesday's hearing — many who described bouts of homelessness, or having had their rents rise hundreds of dollars over the past few years — urged a stricter inclusionary zoning ordinance to help working-class people stay living in Worcester.

Quinsigamond Community College President Luis Pedraja said that many students are struggling to find housing in Worcester, and many of his staff and faculty, too.

"If Worcester is going to thrive, and I am in support of economic development, we need to make sure we don't leave anybody behind," he said.

Representatives from the Worcester Chamber of Commerce, real estate attorneys and Worcester Business Development Corporation also spoke in

favor of the inclusionary zoning ordinance — but not at the stricter levels proposed by housing coalition members. They warned a stronger ordinance could slow housing development.

"We don't want to cool the private investment that's coming to this city to build affordable housing," WBDC Director Craig Blais said.