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In Salem, \$25M housing plan at former church gets OK

By Tom Dalton Staff writer

SALEM — After five years of stops and starts, a \$25 million plan to build housing at the site of the former St. Joseph Church got the green light last night.

Although the Salem Planning Board's approval of the 76-unit plan is a giant step forward for the stalled project, it still isn't clear what or when something will be constructed at the 2-acre site on lower Lafayette Street.

At the start of the standing-room-only meeting at 120 Washington St., Joseph Correnti, the attorney for the developer, was granted a continuance for a second and alternative proposal for the same site — a more controversial plan that includes a drive-through pharmacy on the ground floor of a large building proposed for the corner of Lafayette and Dow streets.

The pharmacy plan, as it is known, "needs a little more work," Correnti told the board, which continued the matter to Oct. 21. After last night's meeting, Correnti stressed that they have not abandoned the pharmacy proposal, just postponed it.

The plan approved last night, which may or may not get built, has a small amount of retail space and housing in three buildings — a new four-story structure at the corner of Lafayette and Dow streets and the former school and rectory.

The former St. Joseph Church and convent will be demolished under the proposal.

In a new and potentially significant development, a consultant working with the developer — the Planning Office for Urban Affairs, the development arm of the Archdiocese of Boston — said that while the four-story building will have apartments, the other two may include condominiums.

"We'd like to do some homeownership in those buildings if it's feasible," Peter Roche said.

When this project began in 2005, the Planning Office intended to build condominiums, but that hope was abandoned after the project got delayed and then swallowed up by the national housing crisis.

The developer apparently decided to put its pharmacy plan on hold because of a financing deadline.

It had to submit an application this week with the state Department of Housing and Community Development.

"We need an approval now to be able to submit an approved plan for timely financing," Correnti said after the meeting.

Although several people spoke out strongly against plans to demolish the church, and others asked the board to delay its decision until a state historic review is completed or to explore other options, just as many called for the long-delayed housing project to go forward.

"It's time to move on ..." said Ellen Galligan, a longtime Salem resident and social worker with Catholic Charities. "This isn't a building (i.e., the church) that can be preserved. It's a building that our God would want to see used to house people."

That sentiment was echoed by many others, including Lucy Corchado, a former city councilor who is president of The Point Neighborhood Association, which represents residents in the low-income, largely Hispanic neighborhood surrounding the church.

"I think it has been an injustice to wait for so long for something to get going," Corchado said.

As part of last night's decision, the Planning Board told the developer to try, "if feasible," to preserve a huge statue of St. Joseph that was buried years ago under a church parking lot.

The developer, who still needs financing OKs and must complete a state historic review, said it will be back before the Planning Board next month to continue the review of its alternative, so-called "pharmacy plan."