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NEWSLETTER



SANDERSON PLACE
SUNDERLAND MASSACHUSETTS
AUSTIN DESIGN COOPERATIVE, INC

FALL
2022

ANATOMY OF AN AFFORDABLE HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

SANDERSON PLACE - 120 NORTH MAIN STREET SUNDERLAND MA

THE TOWN

Lorin Starr, Chair, 120 North Main Street Committee

Concerned with the lack of affordable housing options for seniors, Sunderland’s Selectboard, Housing Committee and Community Preservation Committee (CPC) searched for a solution to this vexing problem. The fact is that small towns have few tools to direct development and Sunderland had no intention of owning or operating such housing. Then the property at 120 North Main Street became available.... was this the opportunity we had been waiting for?

The town took the chance and approved the purchase of the property with CPA funds¹ at a Town Meeting in 2014. The 120 North Main Street Committee was appointed, and our work began.

We approached this as a “Friendly 40b” project. 40b enables local Zoning Boards of Appeals to approve affordable housing developments under flexible rules (typically allowing the ZBA to set aside local zoning laws for density and overall maximum size) if at least 20-25% of the units have long-term affordability. In a “Friendly 40b,” the town and developer work together to shape the development. Our goal was to issue an RFP for development. To get there we need to complete both a Site Feasibility Study and a Market Study. The Site Feasibility Study was completed by the Berkshire Design Group (Northampton MA) and the Market Study was prepared by LDS Group LLC (Newton, MA)².

The site was both ideal and profoundly challenging. North Main Street has a historic streetscape: a wide linear green, sidewalks set back under the canopy of mature trees (including the famed Buttonball) and a steady rhythm of houses. At 120 North Main the 3.9-acre, L-shaped parcel of land fronts the east side of North Main Street within walking distance of Town Hall, the public library, Riverside Park, small grocery stores, and many of the restaurants in town. Notably, it is also accessible by public transportation on the PVTa’s Sunderland-South Amherst route as well as the FRTA’s Sunderland-Greenfield route.

The challenges included considerably more extensive wetlands than had been anticipated. The Committee assessed community concerns including the historic significance of the existing house to the streetscape and the importance of development that was in keeping with the character of the neighborhood.

The Berkshire Design Group offered a dozen or more designs. Ultimately, we decided to condense the project into a larger multi-story building with a smaller overall footprint on the site.

We insisted on the preservation of the existing house, which we knew was difficult both financially and in terms of management and operations. And, we required that all the units be affordable

The final report prepared by LDS, “Supply and Demand for 120 North Main Street, Sunderland MA,” included background information on the town and the existing housing stock, rental rates, cost burden etc. Not surprisingly, the report validated the need for affordable senior housing in Sunderland but the final analysis of development costs for the proposed plan suggested that the financial feasibility of the project was marginal.

So, with considerable trepidation we released an RFP for design and development prepared by the Franklin Regional Council of Governments (FRCOG)³. On January 13, 2017, we went up to the FRCOG offices in Greenfield to see if, after more than two years of work on the project, we had received any proposals.



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THE DEVELOPER

Gina Govoni, Rural Development, Inc.

Laura Baker, Valley Community Development

At that moment, I (Laura Baker) waited anxiously at the FRCOG offices with the large box of proposals for the “bid opening” to see if there were any competing proposers. As I had anticipated, there were none.

Earlier, at the site visit for interested proposers, I was the only representative from an affordable housing developer. Other attendees were private developers and builders who were only interested in undertaking the development with a non-profit partner. Realizing that there would potentially be no bidders, my organization (Valley Community Development based in Northampton) reached out to our Franklin County counterpart, Rural Development, Inc. (RDI). At that point in time, RDI did not have staff capacity to develop the property. However, through their relationship with the Franklin County Regional Housing & Redevelopment Authority, was in an excellent position to sponsor this project, and to manage affordable senior housing located in Sunderland. In short order, RDI and Valley agreed work together, with Valley providing Project Management and RDI serving as the end owner and property manager.

The primary challenge we faced was one of scale. The Town’s RFP sought 18 units of senior housing. We deemed this scale of development financially

infeasible (and it was also the likely reason for lack of other proposers). RDI worked with local architect, Austin Design, to stay true to the 120 North Main Street Committee’s visual concept for the property while boosting the number of housing units. By stretching the building’s footprint, adding dormers to accommodate “attic” units, making each unit smaller, and building an addition to the existing antique farmhouse, we reached a unit count of 34 apartments, a financially feasible scale for development and for property management. This larger scale was proposed to the Town, and they accepted. (Final development size is 33 apartments—30 one-bedrooms and 3 two-bedrooms.)

The balance of the pre-development phase included challenges typical to affordable housing development, including environmental and historic concerns, abutter appeals, and the need to raise funds from a multiplicity of local, state, and private sources.

The construction phase, as is true for many recent projects, has been a slog through molasses due to material scarcity and supply chain disruption. We are grateful for the intrepid work of the General Contractor, Marois Construction, who capably steered the ship through this very difficult time in the construction sector.

Recent marketing for tenants was met with great excitement from area seniors eager to move into attractive, affordable, and accessible housing while continuing to live in the beautiful, rural town of Sunderland.

Site Plan showing the historic house on North Main Street, the main building to the rear, and the extent of the wetlands. (Bershire Design Group Inc, Civil Engineering and Landscape Design)



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THE ARCHITECT
Tom Chalmers AIA, Austin Design Cooperative, Inc.

When we joined the team, the challenges had already been identified and the basic form and siting of the building suggested. The proposal responded to a number of severe site restraints, but also to a few opportunities that would enhance the experience of residents soon to occupy the site.

The historic street frontage pattern called out to be maintained, and the existing village house renovated to maintain the low density and historic character of Main Street. The shape of the remainder of the lot with its narrow center portion and wetlands covering half of the rear section required that most of the units be massed together in a compact multistory building placed at distance from the street but not too far to the rear to protect the meadow wetland. This meadow and wetland in turn became the overriding feature that drove the configuration of the building.

The existing village house absorbed significant design and construction resources to enable it to support one residence consistent with today's standards. The front porch and entry maintain its relation to the street, but a sloped and covered walk was added to make the unit wheelchair accessible. On the exterior, while historic detailing was retained, deteriorated siding was removed and a weather barrier, insulation and new low maintenance siding installed. New windows and a new roof were installed. The interior was gutted, and new insulation, finishes, and efficient heat pump systems were fit to the existing frame. Existing rear storage and outbuildings were removed and a two-unit addition, scaled to be respectful to the front house was added.



The restored farmhouse on North Main Street, with addition to the rear and Mount Sugarloaf beyond

The route from house to apartment building passes along a drive delicately broken up with tree islands and groupings of parking. While configured to minimize the perceived area of pavement, the tree-lined drive supports both a pedestrian sidewalk, car traffic, parking and access for emergency and support vehicles. Beneath the pavement is an extensive stormwater catchment system that controls the volume and velocity of runoff before it enters the wetland. Above are views of the main building, meadows, and fields. As one turns and leaves the site, the house anchors the entrance, with Mount Sugarloaf overhead in the distance.

The barn red apartment building rises and stretches out in an ell shape, forming a courtyard and tower at their intersection - a focal point for the main entrance. Passing into a vestibule and then the lobby, there are glimpses through to the other side before the room opens up to a vaulted ceilinged common room and deck overlooking the meadow and fields beyond.

Lot lines, wetlands, and the desire to reduce massing to an acceptable scale restricted the buildable area and created spatial challenges, specifically: unit design and size; the number and size of community function space; and the space available for plumbing, mechanical, electrical, solar PV, and life safety systems that are a necessary part of all construction projects. Despite that, the development houses 33 units, including three fully accessible and two adaptable units, a community room, meeting room, exercise room, two laundries and an office.

Marois Construction, their subcontractors, and RDI with Valley CDC were able to overcome unprecedented price and supply crises to build a highly energy efficient shell with sophisticated support systems and nicely finished interiors that will provide a welcoming home for seniors for years to come.



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- 1 Under the Community Preservation Act, a municipality's CPC recommends spending (a combination of local (real estate transaction) and state funds) for the purpose of Open Space, Affordable Housing, Historic Preservation and Recreation. In this case funds were borrowed and repaid with CPA funds.
 - 2 The Site Feasibility Study and Market Studies were funded with a CDBG grant.
 - 3 A Planning Assistance toward Housing (PATH) Grant for Technical Assistance funded working with the Franklin Regional Council of Governments to Develop the RFP for the Procurement of Design/Development Services

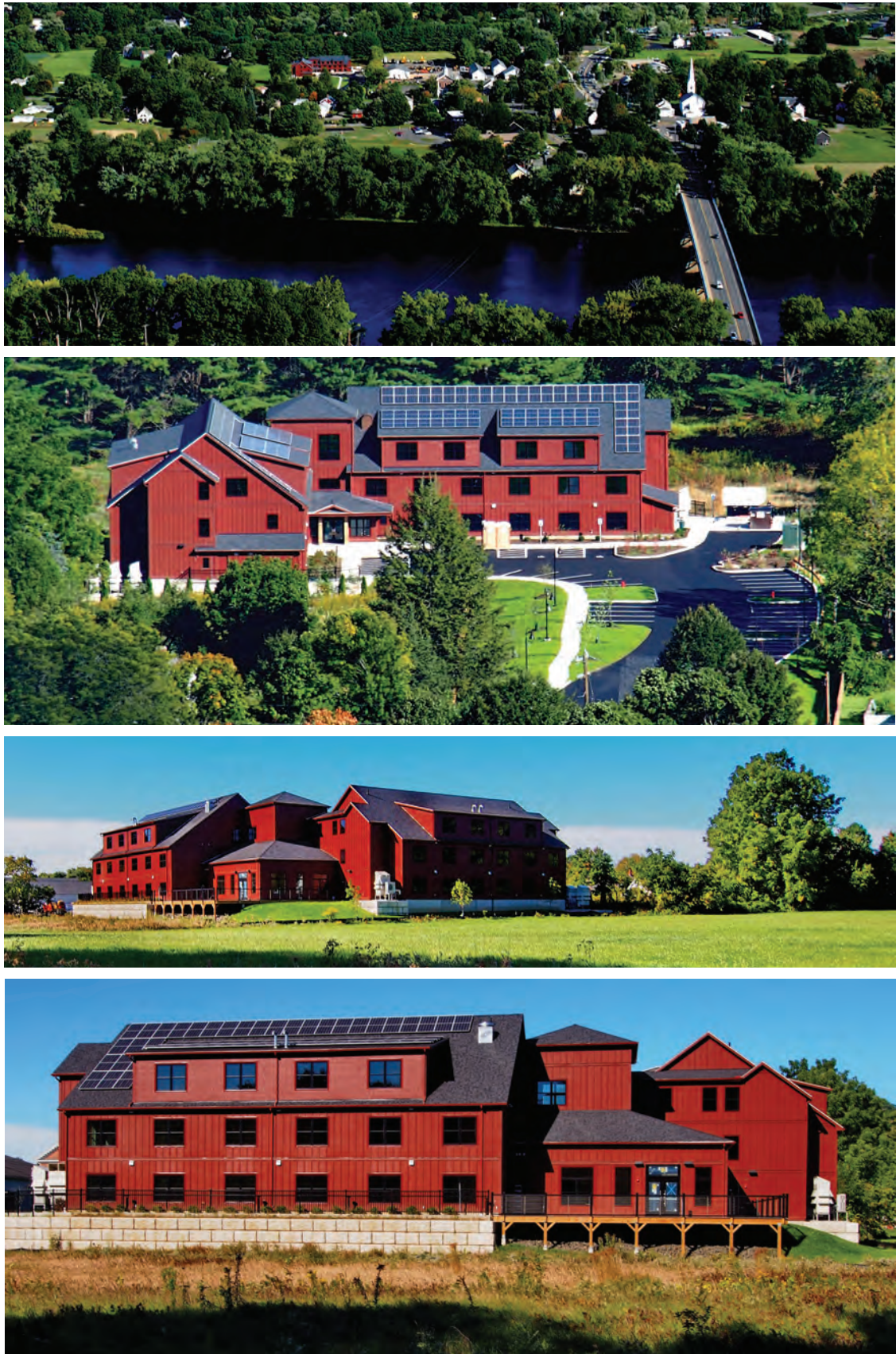
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THE CONCLUSION
Lorin Starr, Chair, 120 North Main Street Committee

Sunderland could not be more pleased with the outcome of the development of Sanderson Place. In addition to providing long-sought affordable senior housing, this project is an enhancement to our village center. As I look back on this 8+ year process I can offer a few insights:

- Navigating the complexities of municipal project like this can be daunting. One of the best pieces of advice I've received is simply this: Do the next thing
- Have a great committee – and that doesn't mean just enthusiasts – healthy skepticism on your committee will result in a better project. We had great expertise in construction, design, real estate, town administration and, most critically, three abutters.
- Affordable housing is not inexpensive; it is dependent on a delicate balance of financing, incentives, and subsidies.
- Be lucky enough to get a great team. Austin Design, RDI, Valley Development and the Franklin County Housing Authority were gracious partners who included the town's 120 North Main Street Committee through design, permitting and construction.
- Have patience – you'll need it!



Funders for Sanderson Place: MA Department of Housing & Community Development (DHCD); Community Economic Development Assistance Corporation (CEDAC); MA Affordable Housing Trust Fund; Charlesbank Homes Foundation; Town of Sunderland CPA; Greenfield Savings Bank; Massachusetts Housing Investment Corporation (MHIC); Federal Home Loan Bank of Boston Affordable Housing Program (FHLBB-AHP)

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