

# BUSINESS JOURNAL

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## Woodstock Commons approved - Finally

BY THERESA KEEGAN

After seven years in the works, and five years seeking approval, a community of affordable housing in Woodstock has finally been given the go-ahead to build by the Woodstock Planning Board.

Woodstock Commons will be a 53-unit complex, with a mixture of housing styles designed for a variety of residents, including seniors, artists and families.

"I think we just reached the end of a long process," said Kevin O'Connor, executive director of the Rural Ulster Preservation Company. "We try and work with communities rather than just in them."

The 53 units will be built behind the Bradley Meadows shopping center, near the Woodstock Playhouse. It will be clustered on seven of the site's 28-acres, and will be multi-generational, one of the first low-income projects to encourage a variety of lifestyles, from retired seniors to young families and low-wage earners.

"It provides a broader array for people as to where they can live," said O'Connor. "And it allows for a community to house all the people in its community."

The project will also be LEED certified, an environmental building designation that certifies a low-energy impact. This is expected to be the first low-income site in the state that will be LEED certified.

"There's a set of strict standards employed (for the certification) and there's a cost to achieving them," said O'Connor. "but we tried to really provide something that answered the call of the Woodstock Housing Committee."

The \$13.4 million project will have a mix of funding sources, including private and public funding, as well as low-income housing tax credits, a federal program administered by the state.

The LEED designation should also increase the project's ability to get state funding.

"The state, in awarding affordable housing funding is looking for green projects," said O'Connor. "It just makes sense."

In the long run, the on-going monthly costs of living in a LEED-certified site should be reduced, as energy use is reduced and the fact it is within walking distance of stores should also ease daily costs of living.

The senior units are expected to rent for approximately \$340 a month and will be available for those earning less than 30 percent of the area's median income, while family units will be available for those earning up to 60 percent of median income. The dozen artist units can be scattered within any of the designations.

Current median income in Ulster is about

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### Woodstock Commons

\$69,000 for a family of four said O'Connor. The agency hopes to start construction in Spring, 2011 and the site will be occupied by summer of 2012, although at least one appeal has already been filed challenging the planning board's unanimous decision. There is already a list of people wanting to live here.

The years-long application process, which included having the application be rejected a few times, has produced some lessons, for both planning boards and those seeking approval, said O'Connor.

An effort is currently under way in the region, championed by Pattern for Progress, to streamline the planning process, so it does not take years for approval. The heart of the issue is implementing the State's Environmental Quality Review Act.

menting the State's Environmental Quality Review Act.

"Taking five years to review 53 units of housing, in my book, is simply too long," said O'Connor. "But it's my hope, working with Pattern and state agencies that I think we can decide what we want out of SEQRA. It's a well-intentioned law, but I think if we could provide some less politicized and more scientific review, by professionals, at a slightly more regional level it could be more neutral and more timely."

A great challenge in the planning process is that planning boards, which ultimately must approve or reject a project, are filled by volunteers depending on the work of staff or professional consultants.

"We really are doing the same studies over and over," said O'Connor. "While there are site specific things that need to be studied, we could plan at a more regional level."

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