

LOCAL & STATE

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Council approves housing project for mixed incomes

The five-story Walker Terrace calls for 40 apartments, both affordable and market rate.

By **MARK PETERS**
Staff Writer

The City Council approved a new apartment building in Portland's West End Monday, allowing the construction of 40 units of mixed-income housing on the site of a former gas station on Congress Street.

The developer, Nathan Szanton, pitched the project as a response to a variety of problems in Greater Portland, from the lack of affordable housing in the city to sprawl in outlying communities.

Councilors agreed. They unanimously approved a contract zone allowing Szanton to build more than twice the number of units allowed by zoning, while cutting the number of parking spaces in half.

"This project does just about everything we as a city have been asking for," Mayor Nathan Smith said.

The advantages of providing the contract zone include a housing project that blends into the neighborhood, an increase in tax revenue from the 0.4-acre site, and new rental units to satisfy a demand for housing in Portland, Smith said.

But neighbors who spoke during a public hearing before the

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council's vote said the project would be too big and would worsen parking problems in the West End.

"I do think the scale is too large for that space," said Alison Hawkes of Carleton Street.

The proposed building known as Walker Terrace would rise five stories above Congress Street, with a sixth-floor mezzanine to provide decks and cathedral ceilings for some apartments. The building would front Walker and Carleton streets as well.

Rents for the 40 apartments would be split between market rate and affordable. The affordable apartments would go to households earning less than \$38,000 for a family of four. The

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Rendering by Maine Workforce Housing

Walker Terrace would rise five stories above Congress Street, on the 0.4-acre site of a former gas station.

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developer estimates an affordable rent for a one-bedroom apartment would be \$660 a month. Market rent for a one-bedroom apartment would be \$1,050.

The proposal takes advantage of so-called "smart growth" principles with builders reusing lots in areas that already have infrastructure — from water and sewer lines to local stores.

Szanton said the project would encourage the use of bus service and help increase foot traffic

along a quiet section of Congress Street. Supporters of the project included affordable-housing and public-transportation advocates, nearby landlords and some neighbors.

Opponents listed parking as the housing project's biggest problem, and disputed whether the building would bring foot traffic to the area. Several residents urged approval of a smaller building with more parking.

Councilors and city planners, however, felt the requirement of one parking space per apartment would not cause more parking problems in the neighborhood. They pointed to statistics from

the 2000 census and their own experience with other housing projects in the city.

Councilors also cited the need for housing when explaining their willingness to back Szanton's project. The city's comprehensive housing plan outlines the need for additional units including apartments over the next decade. Updated two years ago, the plan calls for a total of 4,200 units. More than 400 have been completed so far.

"Our housing situation is still light years away from being adequately addressed," Councilor James Cloutier said.

The developer completed a

similar project nearby on State Street this year. Szanton finished Casco Terrace in June, a 27-unit apartment complex that was built on top of an aging parking garage. That development is a mix of affordable and market rate housing as well.

Szanton needs final approval from the Planning Board before starting construction. The board already has backed the contract zone, and its chairman, Orlando Delogu, sees few complications coming up during the site plan review process.

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