

Needham Times

When Needham resident Jeff Roche approached the Planning Board with a plan to transform the old Hamilton House nursing home at 141 Chestnut St. into an affordable housing complex, the board told him to get creative to solve the parking problem.

If tweaking the existing 14-spot lot and getting an agreement from a neighbor to rent some additional spots would be considered creative, the plan Roche unveiled Tuesday night would be a Picasso.

Roche told the Planning Board Tuesday that he plans to remove the front portion of the existing building and tack it on the back to create an additional 13 spaces on the site. In addition, Roche said he has an agreement with the Needham VFW post to rent an additional 10 spots for the next 10 years with an option to extend.

Roche said the square footage of the building would remain virtually the same - a little less than 25,000 square feet - and that he still plans on putting in 28 housing units. The building would also remain within the three-story height restriction.

The only catch is that he could guarantee only three units to be used for affordable housing. Roche said he would like to guarantee more, but he would have to see how the finances shake out.

"I've committed a minimum number of units, but the maximum hasn't been set," said Roche.

Currently, Roche has a purchase-and-sale agreement that he is paying while he explores his options. If the deal were finalized, Roche would pay more than \$1 million for the 25,000-square foot building and sink another \$2 million into renovations. Originally, he planned to put \$1 million into renovations.

The plan is for the building to house 12 two-bedroom apartments, 15 one-bedroom apartments, and a studio.

In order for Roche to proceed, he will need approval from both the Zoning Board of Appeals and the Planning Board.

Roche will need a special permit on parking as well as zoning. Currently the zoning laws in the Chestnut Street district prohibit residential use on any floor except the second.

Under the current bylaw, parking for apartment complexes is required to be 1.5 spots per unit.

Roche also indicated that he would prefer to take the traditional route in getting his plans approved rather than seeking a state variance, called a chapter 40B, that would essentially side-step the local process.

"If we knew it would be impossible to get a [town] variance, we'd go with the 40B," said attorney Roy Cramer, who represented Roche.

"But the 40B Cramer added that Needham has had only one 40B done and that was nearly 40 years ago, so he didn't know what kind of reaction it would get.

Another option would have been to keep the existing structure intact, add the 10 parking spots from the VFW and try to get a parking waiver from the Planning Board.

Instead, Roche opted to knock off the front of the building and add the spots on site.

"That building is oddly shaped," said board member Paul Killeen. "I can only say you're doing the right thing trying to get rid of the front. I think it would be a wonderful improvement."

"Jeff Roche is a resident in town and he's very sensitive to the concerns of Needham residents," said Cramer. "We came up with this option, and I think it's a very generous alternative."