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An Affordable Housing Project Faces Opposition in Wealthy Chappaqua



Chappaqua's village center.
ÁNGEL FRANCO / THE NEW YORK TIMES

By JOSEPH BERGER
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CHAPPAQUA, N.Y. — Few places on the planet are as enviable as this Westchester County hamlet.

Stately houses are set on spacious, hilly lots shaded by old trees; its village center has gourmet restaurants and bakeries; its schools are top notch and its 9,400 residents have a median household income of \$163,201, ranking the area roughly 40th among America's wealthiest communities.

It is no surprise that Chappaqua is the home of a past president and perhaps a future one, Bill and Hillary Rodham Clinton, as well as a Hollywood star or two.

But the hamlet — like many other affluent, overwhelmingly white localities across the country such as Garden City on Long Island, Wellesley in Massachusetts, Marin County in California and several neighborhoods in New York City — has been churned up by plans to build new housing for people of much lower incomes, including black and Hispanic newcomers.



A developer wants to build 28 units of affordable housing in this third-of-an-acre plot squeezed between railroad tracks and a highway exit ramp.
ANGEL FRANCO / THE NEW YORK TIMES

A developer is offering to build 28 units of affordable rental housing with caps on family earnings, though with no income floor; families of four earning no more than roughly \$64,000 would qualify, as would poorer families, including those who receive federal vouchers.

Rents would be quite low for the area, starting at \$944 for a one-bedroom and \$1,130 for a two-bedroom.

The project would allow Chappaqua, where 91 percent of the residents are white, to contribute to [a desegregation settlement](#) Westchester County reached in 2009 that is being overseen by the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development. The agreement is a condition of Westchester continuing to receive federal housing dollars after it was accused of lying about its compliance with fair-housing mandates.

It requires the county to spend \$51.6 million by 2016 to help finance the building of 750 units of moderate- and low-income housing in some of Westchester's 31 largely white communities, including Rye, Larchmont, Harrison and Mount Pleasant. The county is required to aggressively market those apartments to nonwhites.

Chappaqua Station, as the \$15 million, four-story project is known, would be built in a weed-covered, third-of-an-acre patch on Hunts Lane, squeezed between Metro-North Railroad tracks, an exit ramp off the Saw Mill Parkway and a stone bridge over the tracks.

The plan has become the center of a bitter three-year-long communal and political battle.

Robert J. Greenstein, the current supervisor of New Castle, which includes the Chappaqua and Millwood hamlets, was elected in November partly because of his opposition to the project. In September, a town board led by his predecessor, Susan E. Carpenter, approved the project, 3-2; the new board is, in effect, trying to overturn what the previous board agreed to.

The town's building inspector and an assistant fire chief oppose the project, and the inspector told the developer, Conifer Realty, that it needs to get a state review board to grant eight variances from the state code before the project can proceed.

The Hudson Valley Board of Review was set to decide the matter last Tuesday, but only three of the five members showed up and the developer asked to adjourn the matter until April so that there would be more members present to decide.

The building inspector, William J. Maskiell, contends the site is hazardous because there is insufficient width around some sides of the building for fire ladders to gain access. He and the fire chief, Russell Maitland, also argue that an arched stone overpass leading to the site is too low to permit the largest fire trucks to pass.

Conifer, backed up by an assistant New York City fire chief who said Chappaqua Station would be "the safest building in town," replied that few apartment buildings had access on all four sides.

The developer, which is based in Rochester, also produced a photograph showing Chappaqua's ladder fire truck sailing through the overpass, and pointed out that the purported safety issue did not stop a nursery school and gymnasium from operating a short walk down Hunts Lane.

Mr. Maskiell retorted that he was observing the exigencies of state law in demanding variances. Moreover, he said, the road could be repaved one day or a new, taller generation of trucks could be built that would not be able to quickly reach the proposed building.

"I don't care if they put in affordable housing or a roller rink, if there's a fire there someone is going to die for reasons that are unnecessary," he said in an interview.

Some residents who oppose the project have banded together in a group called Chappaqua for Responsible Affordable Housing. They said they support the creation of moderate-income apartments but think the location is terrible because it is on a forlorn, polluted field.

“Building affordable housing on that site is discriminatory against minority and low-income people because it is located in an undesirable location,” said Bill Spade, 53, an architect who said his group supported an alternative site near the town hall. He noted that the town rejected a market-rate apartment building for that site in 2006.

Randolph M. McLaughlin, a well-known civil rights lawyer representing Conifer, said the alternative site was a wetland, and the market-rate building was rejected not because of fire hazards but because it was too tall. He said that in an era when discriminatory language might not be publicly palatable, opponents of such projects resort to other explanations.

“It’s a delaying tactic with the hope that that project doesn’t get built,” he said. “When people start to make arguments that don’t make sense you have to ask what’s the real reasons. It’s clear they don’t want affordable housing. The town hasn’t built any in 20 years.”

Ned McCormack, the county’s communications director, said that there was no quota for any single community among the 31 named to build affordable apartments. Rather, he said, it is the county that is obligated to prove that 750 units are completed. So far, he said, a total of 403 units are either occupied, have received permits allowing construction to start or have had financing for them arranged by their developers.

Rob Astorino, the county executive and a Republican, has agreed to implement the settlement but has battled federal officials who want, in addition to new housing, municipalities to change what they consider exclusionary zoning. Mr. Astorino said he felt the zoning rules were needed to protect against overbuilding and overcrowded schools.

Craig Gurian, executive director of the Anti-Discrimination Center, the nonprofit group whose [lawsuit against the county](#) led to the desegregation agreement, said that other than Chappaqua there had not been much resistance because “the sites themselves are palatable to the existing status quo.”

The 83 apartments in Cortlandt, he said, were built on what was a psychiatric and drug abuse center for veterans, and the 18 apartments in Rye are on the

border of heavily Hispanic Port Chester. He criticized Westchester for not pressing for changes in zoning and not insisting on mixed-income developments.

A hovering question is whether low-income families would be comfortable in a community of such well-off residents. While opponents think the poorer residents might be stigmatized living between a highway and train tracks, Mr. McLaughlin thinks that they would feel comfortable and that their presence would be a blessing for Chappaqua.

“To have your children raised in a town where everyone looks the same, what message are you sending?” he asked rhetorically. “They’re going to have to live in the world. It’s important to introduce children to diversity so they grow up knowing these people are just like us, no different.”

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