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# Affordable housing at Community Campus? Portsmouth Housing director would be 'delighted'

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PORTSMOUTH — Portsmouth Housing Authority Executive Director Craig Welch said he'd be "delighted to explore any opportunities with the city to put affordable housing at the Community Campus."

The City Council voted unanimously in September to allow City Manager Karen Conard to negotiate a purchase-and-sale agreement for the city to buy the Community Campus facility off West Road and 34 acres of land around it. This vote came after city officials reached a tentative deal to purchase the property for $10 million from the Foundation for Seacoast Health.

"I think that affordable housing should be everywhere," Welch said in an interview Wednesday. "Some people think that it should be only in certain zones or certain places in the city. I adamantly disagree with segregating affordable housing to only certain areas. I think we should pursue opportunities for affordable housing everywhere, be it downtown or on the outskirts of town or even in zoning districts that currently don't provide for it."

**Portsmouth's next steps on Community Campus:** Close $10M deal and make plan for future use

The council has not voted or had any public discussions about how the Community Campus land will be used. Welch acknowledged he has yet to have any "serious conservations with the city about Community Campus."

"But to me just speaking generally, it would be an outstanding location with those recreational fields close by and with the Community Campus facility right there," he said. "I think it would be outstanding, but I also think there are lots of outstanding opportunities if we're working together, have a common purpose and are courageous and creative."

During a meeting between the City Council and the housing authority Monday about affordable housing, former mayor Tom Ferrini, who now serves as chairman of the Housing Authority Board, praised councilors for the pending purchase of the Community Campus.

**52 micro-units in downtown Portsmouth:** Project to meet housing demand gets key approval

"Since no one's making any more land in Portsmouth, that's a wonderful resource," Ferrini said.

Welch acknowledged building affordable housing on any piece of property in Portsmouth "is complicated."

**In Portsmouth:** 'Everything is on the table' for McIntyre development project after election

"Doing something on any kind of city-owned land would have its complexities and this property would be no exception," Welch said. "But there's some recreational fields out there, and this could be an outstanding opportunity."

## Affordable housing on Court Street

Welch's comments come as the Portsmouth Housing Authority continues work to complete the Ruth Lewin Griffin Place project that's creating 64 affordable housing units in a new building off Court Street in downtown Portsmouth.

The project is expected to be completed in April, Welch said.

Portsmouth Housing Authority officials met with the City Council during a work session Monday night to discuss ways the two could work together to create more below market rate housing in Portsmouth.

Asked if the housing authority could have worked with the city to redevelop the Thomas J. McIntyre federal building property, Welch said, "We appear to be far past the time when that opportunity existed."

Welch said the housing authority would have been interested in working with the city to develop affordable housing on the site, which is located in the heart of downtown near Portsmouth's popular waterfront.

"It's a huge project obviously and would have required some kind of joint venture, just like what they're doing now," Welch said. "But we are a nonprofit developer here in the city, we have a track record working with the city to redevelop and repurpose properties into affordable housing.

"We did that with the Atlantic Heights School, the Cottage Hospital and the Lafayette School. If the city wants more affordable housing, then we could have and would have accomplished that at the McIntyre," he added.

Pointing to the litigation between Portsmouth and Redgate/Kane, the city's development partner for the McIntyre project, Welch declined to comment on whether the Portsmouth Housing Authority would be interested in partnering with the city on McIntyre now if the new incoming City Council voted to change course on plans for the property.

“I will say that PHA is open to any opportunity to work with the city,” he said.

Redeveloping the McIntyre property to provide affordable housing “would have not been easy to do mind you, it would have required a lot of financial strength, a lot of expertise, a lot of community support,” Welch said. “Portsmouth is a world class city with world class people, if we were courageous and creative there’s lots of possibilities."

## Tens of millions in equity

The Portsmouth Housing Authority is also continuing to look at ways to either add more below-market-rate housing in the city or protect the affordable housing that exists now, Welch told the City Council Monday. He stressed the message again during a Wednesday interview.

“We are very proud of what we do and what we are doing right now to add to the supply of affordable housing. We also have some new HUD programs that are coming down the pike, and I anticipate we will have the opportunity to recapitalize our entire public housing portfolio over the next 10 years,” Welch told the City Council.

That move, he said, “will allow us to either rehab, redevelop or reposition some of these properties.”

Because there’s no debt on any of the 11 properties the Portsmouth Housing Authority owns and operates, the authority could extract funds “to do all kinds of exciting things that can be part new development or part redevelopment, to add to the supply and preserve the supply,” Welch said.

He explained that the PHA could use the equity in its existing 11 properties to “do either major rehabs of these buildings or other expansion or redevelopment.”

“If you look at the value of the real estate that the Portsmouth Housing Authority owns, we have the potential to tap into tens of millions in equity,” Welch said.

Because the housing at Gosling Meadows is located on 11 acres of land, Portsmouth Housing Authority could use some of the equity “over several phases to make significant improvements to that community and also add more units,” he said.

“It could be mixed income housing, maybe some senior citizen housing, that’s an example of an opportunity we have over the next 10 years,” Welch said.

There are currently 490 households on the Portsmouth Housing Authority’s waiting list, seeking the “safe, decent, affordable housing” that the authority provides, Welch told the council.

Of those people seeking housing, 40% are seniors, 10% are veterans, and 25% “describe themselves as homeless,” Welch said.

The Portsmouth Housing Authority also commissioned a housing needs assessment study – which Welch said the city will also have access to – so they can be “really well informed” moving forward.

Welch said he believes the election of the new council, especially Mayor-elect Deaglan McEachern, will make it easier for the city and housing authority to work together to create more affordable housing.

“To have a mayor that’s crystal clear that this is a priority for him is enormously beneficial to our meeting our goals,” Welch said.