

# Proposed Mixed Income Studio Apartment – 132 Northampton Rd

## Response to Neighbor Concerns & Other Frequently Asked Questions:

Prepared by: Valley Community Development Corporation (“Valley”)

**Version 2—Revised 6.17.19**

### **Community Input**

Valley invited abutters to a meeting about this proposed development in late April. Such a meeting is not required under the Town’s zoning process. Valley hosted the meeting because staff want to hear from neighbors and other community members, to understand their concerns, and to have an opportunity to respond. The discussion below is one response.

Valley seeks an open dialogue with neighbors and community members about the proposed development during planning and implementation, and one that will continue after the property is developed.

### **Who will Live at this Property?**

The proposed building contains 28 studio apartments (each with its own bathroom and kitchenette). Common areas include a living area, shared laundry, and outdoor patio. An on-site office will be available for use by property management and staff.

**The majority of studio apartments will house moderate income employed persons who are equally likely to be male or female.**

*Background Data: A person working full-time at the current MA minimum wage earns \$24,960 annually. The median per capital income in Amherst is \$20,336; the median single person household income is \$28,018; and the median rental household income (all size households) is \$28,290.*

#### **8 studios will have an income cap of \$31,050**

A large proportion of Amherst residents will be eligible, including service workers, laborers, maintenance staff, health care aides, and teaching assistants.

#### **8 studios will have an income cap of \$49,700**

Persons likely to be eligible include associate level administrative staff, para-professionals, social workers, adjunct faculty.

#### **10 studios will have a homeless preference and an income cap of \$18,650**

Homeless persons lack adequate, permanent, affordable housing. In addition to persons who might stay in a shelter, these persons include:

- A person fleeing domestic violence

- Someone living double up with family or friends
- A person living in a building that has unsafe conditions
- Someone paying an unaffordable percentage of his / her income for rent
- A person whose housing was condemned or damaged by fire or natural disaster
- Someone who cannot remain in their current housing due to a physical disability
- A person who is newly separated or divorced and cannot remain in the family home and cannot afford a second home

**2 studios will be for tenants referred from the Department of Mental Health with an income cap of \$18,650**

These persons may be employed full-time, part-time, or unemployed. They will receive regular and on-going clinical and support services from the Department of Mental Health.

### **Safety Concerns**

1. Valley has an extensive tenant screening process to ensure that selected tenants do not pose a threat to other building residents or to neighbors. (See Tenant Selection and Screening Overview and Tenant Bios.) At a recent meeting of the Amherst Homeless Services Group, the Amherst police officer in attendance stated that, from a public safety perspective, the police department would prefer that individuals be housed rather than homeless.
2. While Valley works hard to assist its tenants and preserve tenancies whenever possible, Valley has, and will, evict tenants who do not conform with lease requirements, or who create a nuisance for other tenants.
3. Neighbors have concerns about potential tenants regarding substance use and crime. Some data framing these concerns seem consistent with a “chronically homeless” population (those who have both long-standing lack of housing combined with a severe mental illness, substance use disorder, or disability) vs. a “homeless” population (a much broader definition that includes persons who lack housing for a variety of reasons). Nationally, less than 25% of homeless persons meet the definition for chronic homelessness. The development proposed at 132 Northampton Road is not limited to persons who are chronically homeless. It is targeted to the broader homeless population. Consistent with national trends, approximately 25% of homeless residents may meet the definition of chronically homeless.
4. The screening process that Valley and its professional property management company conduct evaluates each prospective tenant as an individual, taking into account their personal history, CORI background, references, etc.
5. It is suggested that Valley limit the number of tenants with mental health disabilities. As above, Valley proposes to screen each tenant individually. Screening out or limiting tenants with mental health disabilities solely on the basis of that disability is not legal. Massachusetts Fair Housing Law prohibits any landlord from refusing to rent to an otherwise qualified tenant on the basis of a disability, including a mental health disability.
6. Valley has ample direct experience that housing the proposed populations does not cause harm to neighbors. Valley has operated similar housing for almost 30 years without any incident of violence to neighbors. This housing includes (4) units for clients of the Department of Mental Health and (23) units for homeless persons. One property, operated since 1990, abuts the playground of the Bridge Street Elementary School. No complaints have ever been received

from the school staff or parents. Another similar building (operated by another non-profit Way Finders, Inc.) abuts the Smith College athletic area and riding stables. Property management for this site report that no complaints have ever been received from this all-women's College.

7. Given the screening procedures Valley follows coupled with our past experience, we do not believe our future tenants will pose a risk of harm to neighbors.
8. Insufficient Lighting. We observe pedestrians using the sidewalks along Northampton Road daily. If there is inadequate lighting on Northampton Road or on adjacent side streets, we believe that issue should be addressed for all pedestrians. It is not a condition unique to, or created by, the proposed housing.

## **Proposed Development is Consistent with Neighborhood Character**

We observe that neighbors describe this area as a quiet, residential neighborhood in some statements. In other statements, neighbors cite the location as being "very busy" and that the adjacent athletic fields have "...very bright floodlights, loud music, shouting and associated parking congestion, multiple times each week during several months of the year corresponding to the two sports seasons." Neighbors stated at a community meeting that there is heavy drinking taking place at Pratt Field. Amherst College staff note that this section of Route 9 is a "problem area" for the College, as students walking on it sometimes experience harassment, with passing motorists yelling out slurs and making cat-calls.

Neighbors characterize this as a single-family, owner-occupied neighborhood. We have analyzed Assessors data for the area, and conclude this is a mixed, residential area. It includes single-family, owner-occupied housing but, along Northampton Road, this is not the dominant use.

Immediate neighbors to the property at 132 Northampton Road are:

- Amherst College Field House and athletic field (as above, neighbors state this is the source of bright lights, loud music, shouting, and parking congestion)—a non-residential use
- One large single family owner occupied home that includes commercial use as an inn / B & B
- Two-family rental

On the opposite side of Northampton Road are:

- Two-family owner-occupied house
- 6-unit condominium in which all units are rentals; this building contains 14 bedrooms with projected occupancy between 14 – 20 persons; owner resides in Florida
- a single-family home that is for sale

Abutters to the property (Town definition of 300') include a majority of residential rental units with the largest parcel being the Amherst College fields.

- Most uses are residential (consistent with the proposed development)
- The majority of housing units are not owner-occupied (consistent with the proposed rental housing development)
- The site sits at the nexus of three different zones (RG, RN, and ED) highlighting the mixed nature of this location

We describe the primary neighborhood for this proposed development as the Northampton Road corridor between University Drive and Town Center. This is the major transit connector and is where future tenants will primarily drive, bike, and walk. The character of this corridor is not owner-occupied housing, nor is it quiet being subject to a heavy volume of traffic. Of the 45 parcels on this road, only 14

(31%) include an owner occupant. Of the total residential units (144) on Northampton Road, only 14 are owner occupied (less than 1%). While there are many single-family homes in the area, there are also densely settled parcels along Northampton Road, such as the Amherst College residence halls. Assessors records show three residences having 18, 27, and 45 bedrooms respectively. Located only 1,100 feet from this site is a 78-unit assisted living facility that contains efficiency, one-bedroom, and two-bedroom rental units.

Building new rental housing at this location is consistent with the neighborhood, given that the majority of uses within the 300' abutter circle, and the dominant use along Northampton Road, is residential rental housing. Affordable housing is frequently built at a greater density than the surrounding neighborhood. In this case, there are several dense housing uses nearby, including the 6-unit rental with 14 bedrooms across the street, nearby Amherst residence halls and a 78-unit assisted living facility.

## **Intentional Choice of Location**

We have been told that Valley selected the site at 132 Northampton Road simply because it came up for sale and “at the final hour.” We do not believe this perception is accurate. Early in the site search process, two years ago, Valley established site selection criteria. These criteria were reviewed with local groups and Town Planners. Valley identified a mid-way location on Northampton Road as a highly preferred location because it had the potential to meet most site selection criteria and was walkable both to Town and to a major shopping center. Valley then discussed Northampton Road as a preferred location at meetings with the Amherst Homeless Systems Group and the Amherst Municipal Affordable Housing Trust. Valley then sent letters to more than a dozen owners on Northampton Road (in February 2018) to inquire whether they would be willing to sell their properties to Valley. The owner of a vacant lot located on Northampton Road near the corner of Dana Street responded to this letter affirmatively. Valley then secured an option to purchase this parcel and began site feasibility analysis. Ultimately this parcel, in spite of its preferred location, was determined to be too small and steep for development. At the same time, the site at 132 Northampton Road came on the market. At almost 1 acre of land, and being relatively level, it is well suited for development. Early “fit tests” to determine how many units could be accommodated showed that as many as 50 units could be built on this site. The seller of this property, as well as Amherst College staff, have confirmed that 132 Northampton Road was offered first to Amherst College before being placed on the open market and the College declined to purchase it.

## **Proximity to Pratt Field**

Neighbors raise a concern that the proposed development will eliminate public use of Pratt Field because tenants will cause harm to users of Pratt Field, or act in inappropriate ways on the Field, or cause a nuisance on the Field and, when this happens, the College will restrict public use. Since, based on Valley’s tenant screening criteria combined with decades of experience, we expect that the proposed tenants will cause no harm or nuisance to neighbors, there should be no impact on Amherst College policies with respect to Pratt Field. We understand from neighbors that the Field has been closed to the public in the past in response to past circumstances. We understand from Amherst College that negative incidents on the Field perpetrated by any community member could cause the College to reconsider its current policy of allowing general public use. We assume that there are a variety of potential issues such as unsupervised children using the Field, or people failing to clean up after walking their dogs on the Field, that could prompt the College to limit access or change its policies.

## Impact on Surrounding Property Values

Neighbors raise a concern that the proposed development will adversely impact their property values. The current assessed value of 132 Northampton Road is \$249,300. After consultation with the Town Assessor, the estimated value following the proposed development is \$963,000. We expect this increase in property value will have little to no impact on neighboring property values. It certainly should not cause them to decrease. Numerous studies have analyzed the impact that affordable housing development has on neighboring property values. These studies examine values both before and after new affordable housing is built. They find no adverse impact. Sample studies can be found at: [Does affordable housing negatively impact nearby property values? - Community and Economic Development in North Carolina and Beyond](#) and [Dontputithere:Insights - Dont Put It Here.pdf](#).

## Increase in Local Revenue

The increased assessed value translates into increased local tax revenue. In the first year following development, it is estimated that the taxes would increase almost four-fold, **from the current annual tax of \$5,435 to an estimated annual tax of \$21,000**. Over the first 10 years, this amounts to increased tax revenue of **\$178,435** over the present use and over 20 years the increased revenue is **\$418,238**.

On-going costs of the property would be paid from rental income, including on-site property management and maintenance staff costs. The cost of the on-site Resident Services Coordinator would be paid from a combination of State sources and rental income. A variety of community-based service providers have committed to serving tenants, as needed, through Memorandums of Understanding with Valley. These programs have their own funding streams and serve a wide range of Amherst and regional residents. Because most tenants will be typical rental households, most tenants are expected to need no services.

As indicated prior, use of local Police may diminish when currently homeless residents are placed in housing. Studies supporting this assertion are available. Savings on public safety costs further increase local revenue. With the advanced fire protection systems in place (outlined below), there is no anticipated increase in work-load for the Fire Department. As the residents will be single adults, there will be no added costs to educate children.

## Low per Unit Amount of Town Capital Support

For this development, Valley requested and received a \$50,000 planning grant; Valley requested and was included in the Town's CDBG application for \$200,000 for design and energy efficiency; and Valley has requested \$500,000 in CPA funds for development, which has been recommended for funding by the Town's Community Preservation Committee. If awarded all of these local funds, the total Town contribution will be \$750,000, or \$26,786 per affordable housing unit. This level of Town support would mark the lowest amount of Town funds per affordable housing unit for any Town supported project creating new affordable housing units. The median amount of Town funds per new affordable housing unit is \$42,000, with a high of \$160,000 per unit and a low of \$30,357 per unit. An award of \$750,000 in local funds equals 15.6% of the overall development budget. Town funds will leverage over \$4,000,000 in state, federal, and private resources.

## **Traffic and Transportation Access**

Valley projects that 50% or more of the tenants at this proposed location will travel by foot, bike, van, ride-share, or bus. Existing sidewalks (plus planned sidewalk improvements by MA DOT) make this a highly walkable location. The bike path is nearby. There are several bus stops located within ½ mile. Northampton Road (aka State Highway Route 9) is a heavily trafficked roadway. Neighbors report it to be so heavily trafficked that sometimes there is bumper to bumper stand-still. Concerns about traffic raised in conjunction with this proposed development may relate to existing traffic issues and will not be created by the proposed development. The small number of vehicles to be added to Route 9—likely 1 or 2 car trips per hour--will have a statistically negligible impact on the overall traffic pattern of the roadway. During permitting the Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) can request a traffic study should the ZBA determine this is warranted.

## **Fire Safety and Risk of Fire**

This will be a non-smoking building equipped with a state of the art hard wired smoke and fire detection system. There will be sprinklers throughout the building and fire suppression devices over each cooktop (to prevent fire in case someone leaves a pot on and forgets it). With these features, it will be one of the most fire-safe buildings in the area. In buildings like this one equipped with a hard wired fire alarm system, any tampering or attempt to disable the system causes it to short out and sets off the alarm. Thus any tampering (and in Valley's experience this is extremely rare) is immediately detected and addressed. Consultation is underway between Valley and the Town Fire Inspector, including a site visit and flow tests of nearby hydrants. Valley will add a new fire hydrant in front of this building if the Fire Department makes this recommendation. There is space on this site for a turn-around for small fire equipment and for even the largest fire truck to pull fully off of Northampton Road into the proposed driveway in the event of fire. Neighbors report that when the Fire Department responds to other properties along Northampton Road, there is often insufficient room for the truck to pull off of Northampton Road and so the truck remains pulled to the side of Northampton Road, in the way of traffic, throughout its response time.

## **Walkable Location & Crossing Northampton Road**

One of the most favorable features of this location is its walkability. It is approximately equidistant from Town Center, where there are a variety of services, including a Community Health Center, and the shopping plaza at the corner of Northampton Road and University Drive. It is walking distance to many of the Town's employers including all of the businesses in downtown, Town Hall, Amherst College, and the stores and offices along University Drive. It is less than ½ mile to several bus stops and close to the bike trail. These are all tremendous assets for low and moderate income persons, or those who choose not to own a car.

Winter in New England presents challenges to us all, most especially to those who have no home. These persons are often walking miles each day throughout the year carrying all of their possessions with them. If they leave their belongings somewhere, they are often lost or stolen. Compared with this circumstance, a ½ mile walk or bike ride with groceries is not an undue hardship.

At the proposed development, some tenants will have vehicles. It is our experience that there is frequently ride sharing that occurs within a multi-unit building. In addition, there will be regular on-site staffing by a Resident Services Coordinator. The Coordinator can help arrange transportation for a group of tenants, or may provide rides. As we all do, people may choose to stay indoors in severe weather. Tenants with physical disabilities, mobility limitations, and seniors can access low cost van services available to all Amherst residents in these population groups.

Neighbors have stated that crossing Northampton Road is extremely dangerous and would be too hazardous for our adult tenants. At the same time, we hear from residents who live on Dana Street that they, and their minor children, routinely access the Pratt Field, located on the opposite side of Northampton Road. We understand that plans are advancing for MA DOT to improve sidewalks on both sides of Northampton Road, to install multi-use travel lanes, and to install two cross walks in close proximity to 132 Northampton Road which will enhance accessibility on foot or by bike and improve crossing safety for all. From the MA DOT web site:

**AMHERST- IMPROVEMENTS & RELATED WORK ON ROUTES 9 & 116, FROM UNIVERSITY DRIVE TO SOUTH PLEASANT STREET (0.8 MILES)**

This is a complete streets project that will improve accommodations for all users. The roadway will be resurfaced and widened for improved bicycle use with marked bicycle lanes, new and reconstructed sidewalks are proposed for improved pedestrian access, and new wheelchair ramps and crosswalks will be installed.

## **Tenant Mix - Diversity of Incomes and Walks of Life**

From earliest planning stages, the Town was clear that housing persons who are homeless is a top priority. The Town was also clear that they did not favor a housing model that congregated only homeless persons at one location. The proposed mix of tenants at this property is intentionally diverse:

- 8 units for tenants who earn no more than \$31,050 (self-pay; no rental subsidy)
- 8 units for tenants who earn no more than \$49,700 (self-pay; no rental subsidy)
- 10 units with homeless preference who earn no more than \$18,650 (with rental subsidy)
- 2 units for tenants referred by the Department of Mental Health who earn no more than \$18,650 (with rental subsidy)

While the lower income units will have rental assistance subsidies (from federal or state sources), the self-pay units will not. These tenants must have sufficient income to afford these units. We expect rents for the units will be in the range of \$650 - \$700, including all utilities.

Many modest income persons who work in Amherst are currently priced out of the Amherst rental market, where the median housing cost for renters is \$1,275. More than 40% of rental households in Amherst now pay over 50% of their income for housing costs, making them “severely cost burdened.” Rental units make up 56% of total occupied housing units in Amherst. About a third (33.2%) of renters live in single-person households in Amherst; in Northampton, single-person households make up 50% of all rental households. Those who live in larger rental households of 3 or more persons are more likely to be students. Since there are so many student rental households in Amherst, we believe the household

size data is skewed and that the number of adult single-person rental households is more in line with Northampton data.

Residents of self-pay units, which are the majority of units proposed (16/28 or 57% of total units) will generally be working women and men. The vast majority of service workers will be income eligible, as will many College and University employees, such as those in dining services, maintenance, administration, as well as adjunct faculty.

In Amherst, the median rental household income is \$28,290. This is in stark contrast to the median owner occupied household income, which is \$107,476. In Amherst renter households earn only 26% of owner occupied households. (Whereas in Hampshire County this ratio is 38% and in Massachusetts it is 41%.) This data is indicative of a class divide between renter households and owner households in Amherst.

### **Capacity of Valley and HMR to manage the proposed new units**

Neighbors have questioned whether Valley has the capacity to manage the proposed 28-unit development. Valley has several decades of experience owning and operating similar types of housing. In Florence, Valley operates a 17-room studio apartment building located within 200' of a second 11-unit building. Together, these buildings comprise 28 units of housing and house a higher percentage of homeless and very low income tenants than is proposed for 132 Northampton Road. One determinant of the number of units proposed for 132 Northampton Road is the desire to house a meaningful number of vulnerable persons, but also to integrate these persons within a mixed income setting. Valley's property management agent, Housing Management Resources (HMR), manages over 8,500 units with a focus on affordable housing in buildings ranging in size from a few units to several hundred units.

### **Why not provide 24 hour staffing for the proposed development?**

The proposed mixed income studio apartment building is for independent adults, the majority of whom will be typical adult workers. Tenant screening will ensure that all selected tenants have the ability to live independently with the level of planned supports. At Valley's four studio apartment buildings, none has an on-site Resident Services Coordinator, as is proposed for the site at 132 Northampton Road. One of the four buildings has an adjacent property management office. None has on-site property management, as is planned for 132 Northampton Road.

The increased on-site staffing proposed for 132 Northampton Road is not a response to a belief that tenants are dangerous. Valley has no experience with any past harm to neighbors from our tenants. Added staff supports are a way to improve and enhance the quality of life for tenants, especially those transitioning from homelessness, and improve outcomes for remaining housed. Staff can assist with access to needed services, such as health insurance, and vocational training; they can assist with navigating systems or applying for work; and they can assist with transportation. Valley has an excellent track record housing homeless tenants, with over 95% of formerly homeless tenants remaining successfully housed for at least one year.

Like the Town and the neighbors, Valley wants this development to be safe and successful. We are proposing a level of on-site services that will achieve this.