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West Rutland buildings to be converted

By Stephanie M. Peters

STAFF WRITER

WEST RUTLAND — Two historic Westside buildings will be repurposed as apartment housing as part of a new Housing Trust of Rutland County income-sensitive housing project.

Last week, the Rutland-based nonprofit housing organization purchased the St. Stanislaus School and Convent, both located on Barnes Street, from Roy Rotella for \$425,000.

Both buildings have long been vacant, although Rotella was among a group of local business owners who purchased the properties in 1980 with the intention of converting the school into condominiums.

From building purchase to construction completion, Executive Director Elisabeth Kulas said the Housing Trust's latest initiative is a \$4.3 million project that will result in the construction of 12 one- and two-bedroom apartments in the two-story school building, five one- and two-bedroom apartments in the convent and the renovation of four apartments in the building at 259 Marble St., which the Housing Trust also owns.

"In this economy there aren't many people who are financially able to do a project like this," Kulas said as she stood on the school's front lawn Wednesday afternoon. "It is a nice neighborhood and to let the buildings continue to sit was dragging the neighborhood down."

Kulas said her organization isn't out to add to the region's apartment stock unless it finds a community has a specific need for additional units or for a particular site, like this, to be renovated. The fact that Rotella and his partners had already started to rough in the wood framing for the condominiums also convinced Kulas it made sense to continue the effort, she said.

The two-story brick facade school building was built in the 1920s and served kindergarten through eighth-grade students until 1978, when it was closed due to declining enrollment, according to Town Manager Mary Ann Goulette, who finished her seventh-grade year there before it was closed.

The two-story, weathered wood convent building, located on the same lot, dates to the late 1800s and served as housing for nuns who taught at the school.

Both sites will require some historic preservation work, for which the Housing Trust was able to tap historic preservation tax credits. The housing trust had both buildings placed on the state's historic register and the National Register of Historic Places.

"We're well-suited to do the historic preservation work," Kulas said. "It takes a little more money as well as some sensitivity."

For instance, the Housing Trust will replace the school's red-rimmed, six-pane windows with energy-efficient windows, triple-glazed, while retaining their historical look.

As the windows might suggest, energy efficiency improvements are also playing a significant role in this project.

The two Barnes Street properties will share one hot water and heating system. A biomass, or pellet, boiler will be installed in the basement of the convent and will pipe heat to the school building underground, while solar panels on top of the school's roof will provide hot water to both, Kulas said.

The Housing Trust's financing for the project includes \$1.25 million of the \$19 million Vermont received from the Housing Bailout Bill of July 2008 to revitalize blighted or foreclosed properties, \$500,000 from the Vermont Housing Conservation Board, about \$315,000 from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's HOME Investment Partnerships Program, \$25,000 in lead abatement funds from HUD and \$1.7 million in investor equity through tax credit programs like historic preservation.

Kulas said a \$400,000 community block grant that West Rutland secured for the Marble Street building in 2000 is also technically a part of the funding since the building has been grouped with the two Barnes Street properties.

Those figures place the cost of constructing each unit at about \$206,000 — which is on the low side for statewide averages in recent years on similar projects, according to Kulas. The average falls between \$200,000 and \$250,000, she said.

"What people don't realize is this is not just fixing up an apartment," she said of public perception of the cost. "This is community development, purchase of the building, removal of biohazardous materials, energy costs. All of those things have price tags."

Construction work is expected to begin soon, with the entire project targeted for completion in the spring. The Housing Trust is taking applications for the new units, which can be made by calling 775-3139. Applicants must be under certain income levels.

Goulette said town residents are excited the buildings are "getting the face-lift they need.

"It's an important historical landmark for the town and it will fill a gap in our housing as well," she said.

stephanie.peters@rutlandherald.com