

Housing group gets \$50K grant for Pownal

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Posted: 01/06/2009 03:06:56 AM EST

Tuesday, January 6

POWNAL — A local community action group plans to make its first large foray into the town to possibly improve on the affordable housing situation.

The Bennington Regional Affordable Housing Corporation (RAHC) has received a \$50,000 grant from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board to do pre-development studies within the town in order to gauge which properties would make the best candidates for affordable housing developments.

Projects throughout area

RAHC has done projects in Bennington, Manchester and Arlington, but so far, none in Pownal, said Jim Sullivan, who serves as Assistant Director of the Bennington County Regional Commission (BCRC), as well as a member of RAHC's board of trustees.

Sullivan said part of the study will be to form a steering committee made up of a consulting firm, which has yet to be chosen, and the Pownal Affordable Housing Committee. Working together, the group will determine if they should seek to build a new affordable housing development or improve an existing one. He said the ultimate goal of RAHC's involvement is not necessarily to provide more affordable housing in Pownal but to improve on what already exists.

The projected completion date for the feasibility study is July 2009, Sullivan said, and RAHC hopes to settle on a consulting firm before the end of January.

RAHC Director Chris Williams said he hopes the group reaches a decision as soon as Jan. 14, pending a final meeting with one of bidders. He said the study will examine zoning laws, the housing market and the exact housing needs of the town.

So far, Williams said, no particular property has been identified beyond a few superficial surveys. He said some of the basic criteria for sites are that they must be hooked up to the sewer system and must be on the market. He said what RAHC doesn't want is to add to rural sprawl, so building a development away from a village center would not be desirable.

Williams said RAHC's goals align with the town's application for a Growth Center designation, and that LandWorks, one of the companies working with the town on the Growth Center, has put in a bid for the development study as well.

The Growth Centers are part of a state program to control population densities by encouraging growth in downtown areas.

Williams said representatives from the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board toured town's mobile home parks a few years ago and had found the living conditions to be some of the worst in the state.

As a result, the town was able to secure money for a new sewer system. The grant to improve the affordable housing developments is also part of the improvement initiatives, he said.

According to Sullivan, much of the mobile home park development in Pownal occurred in the 1960s due to the need for housing created by the Green Mountain Racetrack, which closed in 1992. Sullivan said the mobile homes used by the track's employees were primarily seasonal, but became permanent dwellings later on.

He said he would like to see any new development project shy away from the use of mobile homes, as the structures are difficult to heat and depreciate quickly. Sullivan said Pownal has only 8 percent of Bennington County's single-unit homes, but 25 percent of the county's mobile homes.

Rep. William Botzow, D-Woodford/Pownal, said RAHC's partnership with Pownal is good news for the town.

He said larger towns such as Bennington, have both the money and the experience to do such studies on their own, but smaller towns, with many of their officials on a part-time basis, face a larger challenge.

He said the studies are necessary for a project to be completed successfully.

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