

## Advocates for disabled say Newton affordable housing for homeless vets is discriminatory

By **Dan Atkinson/Staff Writer**

**Wicked Local Newton**

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Newton — A run-down, two-family house on Commonwealth Avenue is setting off a showdown between advocates of affordable housing and accessibility for people with disabilities, and between the mayor and the Board of Aldermen.

Local developer CAN-DO is trying to turn 2148-2150 Commonwealth Ave. into a house for homeless veterans and their families. But its plans do not call for making the house wheelchair-accessible, which outraged the Mayor's Committee for People with Disabilities.

"When we heard about this, we just couldn't believe it," said Rob Caruso, co-chairman of the committee. "To have it non-accessible really flies in the face of everything we're trying to do."

CAN-DO Executive Director Josephine McNeil said federal and state law do not require accessibility for projects of that size, and that holding up the project to make it accessible would harm the intended occupants.

"It's not possible that every single project have accessible units," she said. "You have to look at the collective and not the individual."

The board unanimously approved \$375,000 in CPA funds for the project, called Veterans House, in May, and Alderman Ted Hess-Mahan said the law was "crystal clear" that only the board's approval is necessary to release the funds. But Mayor Setti Warren said he would insist on the access.

"I feel very strongly that all public housing in the city, for veterans or not, should be fully accessible for people with disabilities," Warren said. "It is my policy that as a city, we won't move forward on a project unless it is accessible."

The project was proposed by Citizens for Affordable Housing in Newton Development Organization, which creates and maintains affordable housing in the city. CAN-DO's proposal called for using \$375,000 in Community Preservation Act funds, which are collected through a 1 percent tax on residents, and \$300,000 in federal Community Block Development Grant funds, to pay down the property's mortgage.

CAN-DO bought the two-family house at 2148-2150 Commonwealth Ave. last year for \$666,300. The lower unit would have two bedrooms, and the upper unit would have four bedrooms; CAN-DO was looking to rent the units to homeless veterans through the Boston VA Medical Center.

McNeil said the center gives veterans vouchers for housing, and only homeless veterans with families would be eligible to live in the house. There are several potential tenants already, she said.

But the house sits on a slope, and someone coming to the front of the building would need to climb a dozen stairs. Disabled veterans, or visiting family and friends who are disabled, would likely have no frontal access, Caruso said.

"You probably could do a ramp in back of the house, but there's no accessibility from the front, that's definite," he said.

Committee Co-Chairman Girard Plante said he visited the property and said it was not accessible to people like himself who use wheelchairs.

"The driveway itself is too steep; I've never seen such a driveway," Plante said. "My power chair has anti-tippers to prevent tipping backward, but I didn't go up that driveway."

"And the stairs are cracked visibly; they'd never meet code, never mind be accessible to people with disabilities."

Last week, Plante and Caruso sent a letter outlining their concerns to Warren, the aldermen, the planning department and the Community Preservation Committee. CAN-DO was not copied on the letter. Warren said he's spoken with McNeil since getting the letter.

"I know they're going to go back and work on making it accessible," Warren said.

But that would cost at least \$100,000, which CAN-DO doesn't have in its budget for the property, McNeil said — the money would have to come from the city. She said none of the veterans currently eligible for the program are in wheelchairs.

CAN-DO has never developed a project large enough to require wheelchair accessibility, McNeil said, but the group is looking to purchase a property that would be easier to make wheelchair accessible.

"If we buy that property, we can have it ready for someone with a wheelchair in the same time that it would take to spend \$100,000 [on Veterans House]," McNeil said. Holding up renovations of the house to make it accessible would mean "two homeless families who could be served will not be served."

Hess-Mahan, a former president of CAN-DO's board of directors, agreed.

"To hold this project up to require more than federal law requires is only going to end up hurting homeless vets," he said.

In a January review of the proposal, the Metropolitan Boston Housing Partnership examined its compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act and other disability laws. While the analysis was not a legal determination, it said most disability laws were for buildings with more than two units, and the proposed project didn't fall under their jurisdiction.

That doesn't matter, Plante said. Affordable housing should be accessible to everyone, and he said Warren agreed with him.

"He said to me regardless of what the rules are, we're going to make it a new rule in Newton that any affordable housing, we're going to make it accessible to people with disabilities," he said.

Plante said the committee has invited McNeil to its next meeting in August.

"We're going to ask some tough questions as to why [CAN-DO] did not make it accessible to people with disabilities," Plante said.

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