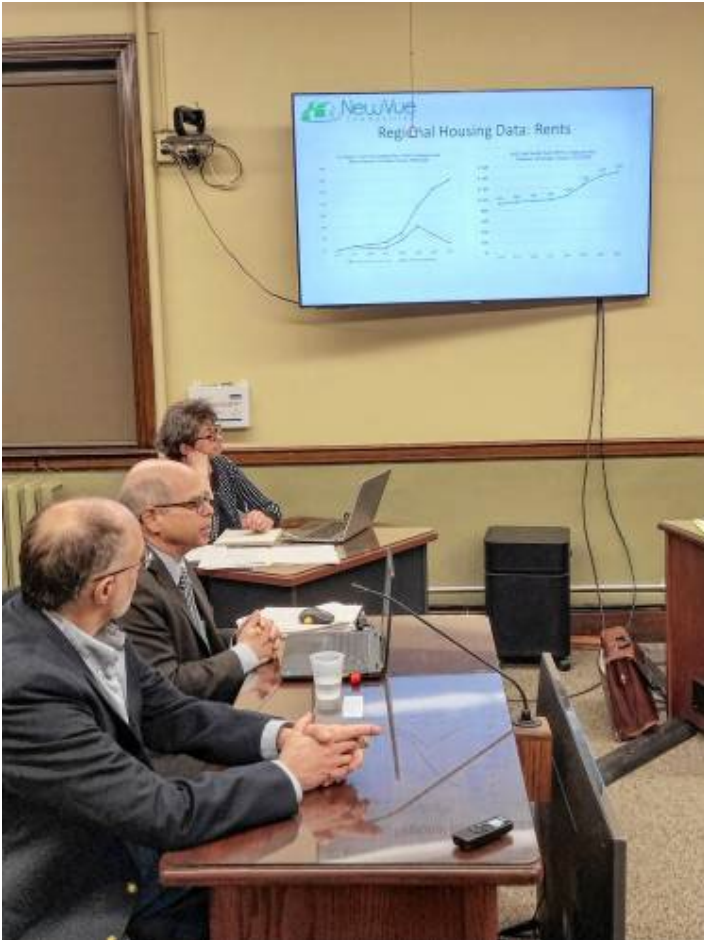


Athol Daily News

Construction on senior housing project in Athol to begin early 2025



The former Riverbend School in Athol. FILE PHOTO



Project Manager James Linfield and Marc Dohan, executive director of NewVue Communities, update Athol's Selectboard on the Riverbend/Bigelow housing project. Dohan said work on the former schools will begin in early 2025. PHOTO BY GREG VINE



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ATHOL – Renovations to turn the former Riverbend and Bigelow schools into mixed-income/senior housing are slated to begin in early 2025.

Representatives of Fitchburg-based NewVue Communities met with the Selectboard Tuesday night to provide an update on plans. Executive Director Marc Dohan and Project Manager James Linfield told the board that, with financing for the project now together, construction should get underway early next year.

NewVue Communities is the nonprofit community development corporation which has been working with the town for several years to bring the project to fruition. NewVue has been working on the project since responding to a Request For Proposals [RFP] issued by the town in 2019. The first RFP, issued in 2016, drew no interest from potential developers.

Dohan provided an overview of the local housing market to show that the Riverbend/Bigelow project is important to meeting the housing needs in Athol, one of the five largest communities in NewVue's planning area, "which stretches from Athol in the west, all the way to Harvard and Groton in the east."

Dohan told the board that average single-family home prices in Athol have risen from \$170,000 in 2018 to \$285,000 by late 2023. The number of homes sold in Athol each year over that period, he said, "have remained pretty steady," with just over 150 homes sold last year.

Rent in Athol, he pointed out, has risen steadily since 2018, with the fair market cost of a typical two-bedroom jumping nearly 60%. The average monthly rent for a two-bedroom unit in 2018 was \$922, with the projected price for 2025 estimated at \$1,462. The statistics quoted by Dohan came from the federal Department of Housing and Urban Development.

“So now is a good time for housing to come online,” he added. “We’re in a good position to do that now.”

“The project is now fully-funded,” Dohan continued. “In [2023] we received special funding from the office of Congressman Jim McGovern for \$1 million that really helped propel the project forward. We’ve also been trying to keep the building both from deteriorating and connected to the community through a special program with the schools, where they produced some art to placed over the windows [at Riverbend].”

Dohan then provided details on potential impacts following completion of the project.

“This is what we will become,” he explained. “Fifty-three units: 20 one-bedroom, 24 two-bedroom, and three nine-bedroom units. About 20 of those apartments will be for seniors, 33 will be for families. There will be a wide range of incomes in the rent. The approximate rental range will be from about \$1,065 to around \$1,888.”

Dohan said NewVue plans to officially acquire the schools in January 2025 “in line with the agreement we signed with the town. We hope to close in January, but I wouldn’t be surprised if that slipped to February. The state has a lot of closings that they’re doing right at the end of the year, so I wouldn’t be surprised if that slipped a little bit. Construction will start sometime during the first quarter of 2025, and completion and move-in will be sometime in the second quarter of 2026.

“I’m just really thrilled to see the project,” said board member Rebecca Bialecki, “and know that we’re ready to go. This is desperately needed housing for the area. And the reuse of that property is really critical to that whole neighborhood. It will really change things up there.”

“We are very excited to move forward,” said Linfield. “I also want to point out that the town has been amazing. Anytime I’m here, usually asking for something or with my hand out, people have been very responsive – every department. Our team – the architects the contractors – were very pleased that the town has been that responsive. We’ve been able to solve problems before they become problems.”

In addition to renovation of the two existing school buildings, a third structure connecting the schools will be constructed to accommodate senior housing and community space. The project is being funded primarily through a combination of state and federal tax credits, with some additional funds coming in the form of outright grants, loans and \$400,000 in ARPA (American Rescue Plan Act) funds received by Athol during the COVID pandemic.

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