

Ithaca's Spencer Road residents to fight apartments

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(Photo: City of Ithaca)

Story Highlights

- City board gives final OK for Spencer Road project but neighbors keep up their fight.
- Construction could start in October.
- City has backed project as improving housing options but neighbors balk at size, traffic, variance.

Ithaca residents of the area around Spencer Road and Stone Quarry Road pledge to keep fighting the planned affordable-housing rental complex that won city approval this week.

The city Planning and Development Board voted last week to approve the final site plan changes for the Stone Quarry apartments planned by Ithaca Neighborhood Housing and Pathstone Corp. for 400 Spencer Road along with part of the property at 225 Elmira Road.

The 35-unit combination of apartments and townhouses has been in the works for two years and has been backed by many city officials, including the mayor, as a step toward adding housing more working people can afford.

The board also approved the subdivision of the lots INHS is buying for the project. INHS and Pathstone still project to start construction in early October, according to INHS Executive Director Paul Mazzarella.

But it's also gotten strong opposition from Spencer and Stone Quarry residents. They object to a variance allowing a multi-family complex on a site zoned for lower density on a street mostly comprising family houses with some duplexes. They've maintained it'll worsen auto traffic on a street not designed for the burden it's bearing already, without sidewalks or another pedestrian link to the rest of the city.

"Our argument has always been that a 35-unit project, housing more than 100 people, in an area of land only 1.6 acres in size, in a neighborhood of mostly one- and two-family owner occupied homes, on a street that can barely sustain the level of automotive traffic it sees now and definitely cannot safely accommodate pedestrians/bicyclists is, at best, a bad fit," said Benjamin Kirk, who is serving as a spokesman for the group opposed to the plan.

The residents plan to submit comments to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, according to Kirk. HUD is involved because Common Council approved designating some of the city's federal housing funds to Stone Quarry.

A comment period was reopened after area residents told the planning board in July that the state Department of Environmental Conservation had opened a new file on a reported chemical spill on the site, though it turned out the new report was generated when the property owner's engineer found contamination and reported it to the DEC, not from a new spill.

The DEC has signed off on the INHS-Pathstone remediation plan, though some residents question its effectiveness. **Walter Hang, owner of spill-database company Toxics Targeting, told the planning board that similar vapor-blocking methods have not fixed vapor intrusion problems near the former Emerson Power Transmission plant on South Hill.**

According to Kirk, the residents are looking into legally challenging the planning board's decision. Residents have cited what they see as inadequate notice to neighbors, relying on outdated environmental assessments, and a clean-up plan that does not meet federal standards.

"Nobody wants to appear as being against affordable housing — as we in the neighborhood have been characterized time and time again — and so nobody is willing to stand up and say, 'Hey, maybe this isn't such a great idea,'" Kirk said.