

Way Finders details \$27M plan for one of Easthampton's old elementary schools



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Way Finders, the largest nonprofit developer of affordable housing in western Massachusetts, has proposed a \$27 million project to demolish Maple Street School and construct a 54-unit housing complex in its place. RENDERING



By [EMILY THURLOW \(/byline?byline=By EMILY THURLOW\)](#)
Staff Writer

EASTHAMPTON — The committee tasked with ranking three proposals for the reuse of the city’s three former elementary schools heard detailed explanations from each the development teams this week.

Up first was Way Finders Inc., the Springfield affordable housing development company, that is proposing to buy Maple Street School for \$1 to redevelop the site into a \$27 million project that would include 54 new housing units.

Benjamin Merker, the nonprofit’s associate project manager for real estate development, said the decision to focus on one site instead of all three former school buildings is an effort to provide the best and highest use possible.

Of those 54 new housing units, 38 would be affordable rentals dedicated to those earning less than 80% of the area median income and 16 will be market-rate housing.

This will include one-, two- and three-bedroom units, said John Gilbert, project manager for real estate development at Way Finders. All unit sizes will be based on state Department of Housing and Community Development requirements regardless of income. More than 60% of the housing is two- and three-bedroom units.

“Our goal is to create a mixed-income project,” he said, adding that the affordable units will not be segregated from the market rate units.

In order to do that, the development team has proposed demolishing the current structure — which originally opened as an eight-room schoolhouse illuminated by gas lamps in 1897 — and replacing it with a new building influenced by the current building’s architectural details.

Though the team had considered reusing the existing building and connecting an addition to increase the number of potential housing units, the costs to rehab and renovate it would be prohibitive and the overall impact would be diminished, according to Wendy Richter, project architect for The Narrow Gate Architecture LTD in Boston.

The decision to pursue demolition and replacement allowed the team to increase the number of affordable housing units, she said.

Richter noted that the basement grade is “very poor” and not accessible for wheelchair users.

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The new building will be energy efficient, according to relevant environmental certification, such as passive house or meeting LEED standards, or Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.

Passive house construction is voluntary set of construction standards is to make a home comfortable, but also have quantifiable energy efficiency by keeping moisture, sound and temperature fluctuations outside by optimizing sunlight, fresh and filtered air through healthy building materials and specific construction strategies.

LEED-certified construction includes an evaluation of the building's design and construction based on factors including water usage, energy efficiency and air quality. It also factors in building materials and access to public transportation.

Way Finders' design includes 68 parking spaces, bicycle racks, a community park and playground, a community room open to the public and new pedestrian crossings.

If selected, Way Finders estimates it could submit plans to the city late next spring.

The organization estimates that the project will cost more than \$27 million, with construction totaling more than \$19.4 million. They anticipate using \$9.5 million in federal low-income housing tax credits, and \$4.1 million in state low-income housing tax credits.

The estimated time of construction is 18 months. Based upon this schedule, they anticipate development could be ready for leasing and occupancy as early as the late spring or early summer of 2028.

What's next?

The Elementary School Evaluation Committee is expected to submit a recommendation of the highest ranked proposal to the City Council in the next 10 to 15 days.

From there, the council will review the proposal in the Property Subcommittee and make a final recommendation to the full council, which will hold a public hearing and decide whether to accept the proposal or not.

Public comments on these proposals should be submitted to the City Council.

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