

Andover Townsman

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Neighbors creating waves over Taylor Cove: Object to 40B affordable housing development

By Bethany Bray
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Many have lived in their homes for decades, and had never met before. But there's one thing they say they agree on: the Taylor Cove development, a proposed affordable housing project, doesn't belong in Ballardvale.

Roughly 30 residents, many from the River Street neighborhood where the development would be built, attended the Sept. 4 Zoning Board of Appeals meeting, when Todd Wacome, developer of Taylor Cove, presented his project.

Under the business name Taylor Cove Development, Wacome has applied to build 32 three-bedroom townhouses on 12.09 acres at 86 River St., in the southern section of Andover. One-quarter of the units — eight condos — would be affordable housing units.

Residents who live in the area list a bevy of concerns: overcrowding at local schools, increased traffic, the destruction of the parcel's woods. Of Taylor Cove's 12 acres, 1.14 acres are wetlands and the area is close to the Shawsheen River.

"The intent seems to be to squeeze as many units in as possible, with no concern for the neighborhood or the environment," said Susan Davis, a River Street resident. "I am greatly concerned about its impact to vehicular traffic, the danger to pedestrians, bicyclists and pets; the damage to the environment including wildlife and the impact to the existing infrastructure."

But the developer says he hopes to work with town boards and neighbors. The project includes a "tree buffer" to hide the townhouses from view, and people with ties to Andover will have first crack at the project's affordable units.

"We're hoping to fit this project in as best we can, into the existing fabric of Ballardvale," said Don Borenstein, Wacome's attorney. "It is well under the density of what the state would allow for a 40B project (in a suburban area). They generally allow eight units an acre, and we're at 2.7 units an acre."

State law Chapter 40B makes it easier for developers to skirt certain zoning laws if they create affordable housing developments in communities that have less than 10-percent affordable housing.

Andover dropped below 10 percent in 2007. The state lists Andover at 8.9 percent, because affordable housing at Riverview, a 220-unit rental property built in 1987, had a 20-year affordable housing restriction that expired last year, said Lisa Schwarz, senior planner for the town.

The percentage will rise to 9.19 percent when Northfield Commons, an affordable housing complex that has been approved for North Street, is built, she said.

Borenstein, Wacome and the project's engineer, William MacLeod, are all Andover residents, Borenstein said, and believe their project will be beneficial to the town.

The moderate-income buyers who would live in Taylor Cove's affordable units could earn no more than 80 percent of the median income for this area, said Borenstein.

"These types of buyers are school teachers, firemen, folks that are middle-of-the-road financially, and might not otherwise be able to afford to live in Andover," he said.

The zoning board has requested that local preference be given to applicants for the affordable units at Taylor Cove, and Wacome is willing to set aside 70 percent for folks who already work or live in town, Borenstein said.

Barbara Burke, zoning secretary, said Wacome first submitted his application for Taylor Cove on July 14. The ZBA will host several more public hearings on the project, she said. A decision is months away.

Frances Wheeler, a Hillcrest Road resident, said she supports having affordable housing, but feels it should be built in areas of town where multiple-family dwellings would fit in. The River Street area in Ballardvale has only single-family homes, she said.

"It's more like a city or village-type set up, and we're out in the woods here," said Wheeler, whose front door looks out onto the Taylor Cove parcel. "There are concerns about property values going down. It's way too much development for this site, far too dense to be appropriate for this area. Traffic in this area is bad, and now [this would] add 32 houses with 64-plus cars."

Mike Riendeau, who has lived on River Street since 1990, agreed.

"It would be a complete character change, devastating to the whole street," he said. "I'm not opposed to 40B, if it's in an appropriate area. Let's try to pick places in town for that 10 percent that don't change the character of the town."

Taylor Cove would cluster the 32 townhouses in a mix of two and three-unit buildings, centered around a cul-de-sac off River Street. Each would have three bedrooms, 2.5 bathrooms and an attached two-car garage, totaling 2,085 square feet, and would rise two and a half stories tall. The market rate condominiums would be estimated to sell at just under \$500,000 said Borenstein.

Of Taylor Cove's 12 acres, four acres would be set aside as conservation land, said Borenstein. The project's design also includes a trail head, with several parking spaces for hikers.

The Ballardvale site works well for the project, he noted, because it's close to Interstate 93, Ballardvale's retail and commercial center and commuter rail station. There are existing sidewalks within two-tenths of a mile, he said.

Local residents point out that elementary-aged children living in Taylor Cove would go to South Elementary School, which is continually overcrowded.

"My concern is the lack of a sidewalk (on River Street)," said Chris Weigand, a Laconia Drive resident. "It would absolutely be a disaster if more children move in. You're taking your life in your hands to walk there."

River Street is considered so dangerous, said Wheeler, that kids in walking distance to South School have been bused for decades.

"I nearly get clipped every time I leave the driveway," said Riendeau.

Besides traffic, neighbors are concerned about Taylor Cove's effects on the environment.

The wooded parcel proposed for Taylor Cove is home to blue heron, fox, geese, deer and other animals, said Davis. Weigand noted that it's a favorite spot for turtles, who lay eggs in mounds of sand near the Shawsheen. There is even a home on River Street that has a "turtle crossing" sign in its front yard, he said with a chuckle.

Weigand said flooding is already a major concern in the area. In a worst-case scenario, such as the Mother's Day flooding in 2006, River Street floods, becoming completely submerged for days at a time. If an ambulance or fire truck needed to reach Taylor Cove, it would have to drive around through Wilmington, he said.

The Taylor Cove project, a proposed affordable housing development, will be discussed at the Zoning Board of Appeals next public hearing, Oct. 21, 7 p.m., in the meeting room at Andover's Public Safety Center, 32 North Main St.

Mike Riendeau, of River Street, has created a web log about Ballardvale, a portion of which is devoted to the Taylor Cove 40B development. Residents can post comments, and Riendeau has uploaded photos and graphics of Taylor Cove's proposed site. He will

post audio files of every Zoning Board of Appeals meeting where Taylor Cove is discussed, he said. The blog is at www.ballardvale.net.

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Photos



From left, Frances Wheeler, Susan Davis, Kathy Romig and Mike Riendeau, all neighbors in the Hillcrest Road/River Street area, are trying to stop a developer who is looking to build 32 two-and-a-half story townhouses behind them near the Shawsheen River. They have issues with the size, placement, traffic and environmental impact of the proposed ch. 40B affordable housing development. Staff photo