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THIS WEEK

Christa, DePaul team on \$17.5M project

By THOMAS ADAMS
Rochester Business Journal
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A 60-unit complex of affordable housing for the deaf and hard of hearing is planned for Henrietta, the first of its kind in the state, developers said this week. Construction on the \$17.5 million project is scheduled to begin in September.

DePaul Community Services Inc. and Christa Construction LLC are partners in the project. SWBR Architecture, Engineering & Landscape Architecture P.C. designed the building.

The site for the housing is five acres of land on West Henrietta Road, south of Calkins Road. It is expected to be completed in 12 months.

"This is the most exciting project I've done in 35 years at DePaul," President Mark Fuller said.

The project culminates five years of discussions on affordable housing for the deaf, including potential sources of funding.

The \$17.5 million for the DePaul/Christa project includes \$5.7 million provided by New York State Homes & Community Renewal in conjunction with the state Office of Mental Health and Homeless Housing and Assistance Corp.

The project was one of two applications from Monroe County to be approved for HCR funding, Fuller said.

"We're very excited for DePaul to get this project, particularly in the first round," Christa president David Christa said. "It's kind of unheard of. The energy they put behind it, to create an environment for the deaf community, is pretty impressive."

The Rochester area has the nation's largest per capita deaf and hearing-impaired population ages 18 to 64, according to a study released last September by Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technical Institute for the Deaf.

Some 19,438 deaf or hard-of-hearing people younger than 65 live in the area, the study found. An additional 23,236 deaf or hard-of-hearing residents are 65 or older.

In the Rochester metro area, 3.7 percent of 1.1 million residents are deaf or hearing-impaired, the study found; the national rate is 3.5 percent. The higher local rate is due to a disproportional number of deaf and hard-of-hearing residents 25 or younger.

DePaul opened a group home on St. Paul Street in 1980 for people who are deaf and mentally ill, later building a new facility on Baird Road in Penfield. Another DePaul development, Halstead Square on West Main Street in Rochester, includes housing for the deaf.

"So we've been involved on the outskirts," Fuller said of affordable housing for the hearing-impaired. "We really got kind of passionate about this."

Rochester View Apartments includes 56 one-bedroom apartments and four two-bedroom units.

"They are 100 percent equipped for the deaf and hard of hearing," Fuller said. "It's not necessarily going to be 100 percent (hearing-impaired). We're not going to exclude other people that meet different criteria."

Representatives of SWBR met with members of the local deaf community prior to designing the building, said Joseph Gibbons, SWBR partner and project manager.

"They talked about what they would be looking for in a facility like this," Gibbons said. "And there were some case studies of other projects that have been done in the country—I think in Wisconsin and Arizona—where they had done exclusively deaf apartments."

Attributes include plenty of open space within the building to maintain sight lines, Gibbons said.

"For the emergency alarm for the building, there will be official strobes in each of the units where, if the fire alarm goes off, the strobe will indicate that it's going off," Gibbons said.

"We'll have dimming switches for lighting. Some residents may have issues with lighting, so we can be dimmer or brighter, depending on what their needs are."

The kitchens will be set up with deaf-friendly amenities, Gibbons said.

"For example," he said, "if someone leaves the water running in the kitchen sink, there's a light to indicate that the sink is still running."

All units will be wired for video phone and video services, including the intercom, Gibbons said.

"There is a list of detailed requirements, mostly built into the fire alarm system and the electrical infrastructure, that we're going to be putting into each one of these units," he said.

The SWBR design was done with the help of Dennis Baszynski, a deaf employee who has been with the firm for 25 years and is a senior technical coordinator.

"He'll be responsible for the details of the project and coordinating the drawings and some of the constructability issues," Gibbons said. "He's also been involved with the deaf community here in Rochester. He's working for us, and also on their behalf."

The deaf community has been lobbying for affordable housing for five years.

"The deaf community as a whole makes 30 percent less in their lifetime than hearing people," Fuller said. "There's a need for deaf affordable housing."

"The deaf community likes to live together. While I think in general people want to mainstream them, what we hear is that they want to socialize and communicate with each other. Even with all the advancements in technology, which has clearly made their lives better, they like to sit in a room and converse and be within their culture."

Some 61.4 percent of this area's deaf or hard-of-hearing residents age 18 to 25 attend post-secondary education, nearly double the national average, the RIT-NTID report found, attributing the number to the presence of NTID.

"We were approached by the deaf community, say, four or five years ago to do a similar project," Gibbons said. "We talked about different ways we could do it and different funding streams that could happen, and it kind of evaporated. It never had any legs to really get developed."

"I think it maybe had to do with the fact that there wasn't a real solid developer behind it. Now, with DePaul behind it ... it's kind of a resurgence of an effort that started many years ago."

The idea for the Henrietta complex started more than 12 months ago when members of the deaf community approached DePaul, said Fuller, who subsequently went to Columbus, Ohio, to survey a deaf-friendly housing project there.

"Everything we heard there was exactly what they said here," he said. "We're excited to get it in Henrietta. To get it funded in the first round, I think, speaks to how highly regarded this type of project is."

There is a need for affordable housing for the deaf throughout the country, said Fuller, who is interested in building similar facilities in Upstate New York and perhaps in other states.

"We think this could be a franchise," he said.

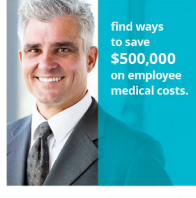
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