

Laptop City Hall: Affordable housing development proposed near Hilldale

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What a difference a municipal boundary can make. Just a few months after the Shorewood Hills Village Board [voted against](#) an apartment project for lower middle-class renters on University Avenue, a similar concept for the Hilldale Mall side of the street was relatively warmly received in front of Madison neighbors on Thursday night.

Representatives from Madison development and property management company [Stone House Development](#) presented plans for the 96-unit apartment structure, which would complete the Target-Hilldale site by filling in the westernmost portion along University Avenue and Segoe Road.

As far as near-west side projects go, the meeting was pretty quiet -- only about 40 attended, rather than [the hundreds for the Target project](#), and most seemed supportive of the project, although concerns about traffic and safety were raised.

Stone House is proposing a "workforce housing" project that would use federal Section 42 tax credits, which allow developers to offer below-market rate rental prices for people making 50 to 60 percent of a county's median income. That's about \$28,000 to \$33,600 (for a single person) in Dane County, so it's not traditional "low-income" housing -- Stone House representatives noted that they hoped nearby Hilldale employees could occupy some of the housing to facilitate a live-work environment.

There would be one, two and three-bedroom units ranging between \$700 and \$975 per month, which Stone House president Helen Bradbury said was a few hundred dollars per month below new market-rate housing in Madison. The development would include 125 underground parking spaces, ample bike parking, a community room and a fitness room.

The Hilldale project would also be considered "green-built," like another one of Stone House's recent projects at Wilson and Ingersoll streets on the near-east side. The [Park Central project](#) was the state's first multi-family development to be certified "green-built," and the proposed Hilldale project would have similar energy-conserving features, from radiant heating to Energy Star appliances to some extent of solar-powered hot water and electricity.

As mentioned before, the neighborhood reception to the proposal seemed largely positive Thursday night -- Hill Farms neighborhood representatives Michael Lawton and Joseph Keyes spoke favorably of it at the end of the meeting, and several attendees mentioned the importance of affordable housing, even questioning whether it should be lower-cost for people who earn in the \$10 to \$14 per hour "gap" between minimum wage and the proposed income range, as many Hilldale employees might.

The biggest concern for many seemed to be traffic -- the Hilldale area will likely see a large increase in traffic on Frey Street as the major entrance for these apartments and for Target, but Rich Arnesen of Stone House noted that flexible work schedules and the potential for nearby workers to walk, bike or take the bus would likely mean there would not be "exodus" on Frey Street at 8 a.m. And, housing is generally considered a less intense traffic-generator than almost any other use for the site, he said.

"They achieve a reasonable density of residential units without driving up the traffic in the way an office, medical, or retail site would," said Ald. Chris Schmidt, who also attended the meeting. The city will be adding a right-turn lane and a traffic light at Frey Street and Segoe Road to accommodate the increased traffic from Target, he added.

Schmidt also noted Stone House Development's good reputation for working with neighborhoods, pointing to a [project on the 600 block of East Johnson Street](#) that had the potential to be controversial, replacing nearly an entire block of deteriorated, but to some degree historic, houses with a similar affordable housing development. That project, [City Row Apartments](#), is set to open at the end of the summer.

The Shorewood Hills affordable housing proposal -- which came from a developer based in Illinois, not Stone House -- quickly fizzled out because of concerns about the village's ability to provide services to so many new residents as well as the potential character-change of the primarily owner-occupied village.

But Madison faces a very different scenario on the other side of University Avenue. The Hilldale area already has a plethora of apartment buildings on and near Sheboygan Avenue, although Arnesen said a market study of the area found less than 2 percent vacancy in the area, indicating a demand for even more rental housing. And Madison is generally well-equipped to absorb the fire and police demands of a new housing project.

At this point, the biggest question mark for the project seems to be financing -- the project is in the very earliest stages right now, as most projects in their neighborhood meetings are, and Stone House may not even get the Section 42 tax credits. Company representatives said they would not go forward with the project without them -- the recipients of the highly coveted credits will be announced by the Wisconsin Housing and Economic Development Authority in June. After that, the project must also run the gauntlet of city committees, with the first being Urban Design Commission in the next two weeks.

Even with all that lying ahead, though, Thursday night appeared to be a good start for the project.