

THE BAY STATE Banner

Dudley Street developer agrees to affordability, diversity standards

Sandra Larson / 7/8/2015, 11:10 a.m.

A for-profit developer planning to transform a former police station at 409 Dudley Street in Roxbury into nine residential units has agreed to a set of new voluntary guidelines for affordability, workforce diversity and neighborhood improvements.

Residential developments of fewer than 10 units are not required under the city's inclusionary zoning laws to include affordable units or to meet particular hiring diversity standards, but Isalia Property Group will abide by a framework that includes below-market rents for one-third of the units and construction workforce diversity targets of 50 percent minority, 10 percent female, and 20 percent local residents.

The agreement emerged from a careful year-long process of discussion and cooperation among Isalia, a relatively new Boston-based developer, and neighborhood groups and city and elected officials.

The project, which will retain the historic exterior of the Victorian-era former police station, won approval easily at a June 23 Zoning Board of Appeal hearing. Stepping up to offer words of support were representatives from the Dudley Street Neighborhood Initiative, Roxbury Path Forward, and the Mount Pleasant Ave, Vine and Forest Streets Neighborhood Association. Also speaking in favor were representatives from the offices of city councilors Tito Jackson, Stephen Murphy and Michael Flaherty, and Kaira Fox, Roxbury Coordinator for the Mayor's Office of Neighborhood Services.

"[Visalia's proposal] ended up being overwhelmingly approved because the developer took time to work with the neighborhood groups," said Lorraine Wheeler, a Moreland Street resident and director of the Roxbury Path Forward neighborhood group.

Wheeler noted that over the last few decades, companies have tended to come into Roxbury without contributing to the neighborhood or getting to know who lives there.

"This developer, because they met several times with people who lived there, brought a completely different tone," she said.

Brian Keith, president of the Mount Pleasant Ave, Vine and Forest Streets association

also expressed satisfaction with the process of forging the framework.

“They didn’t have to make any concessions, but they worked hard for our support,” Keith said. “For them, the biggest thing was putting in a rent cap for three of their units. They were very willing to do it, but I’m sure it was financially difficult.”

Under the agreement, three of the nine units at 409 Dudley St. will be affordable at 70 percent of Area Median income. That means an eligible three-person household would have income of \$62,050 or less, and a two-bedroom unit would rent for no more than \$1,424 per month.

While this is a one-time agreement with this one company, the neighborhood groups and the developer hope this can help future Roxbury developers start community relations off on the right foot.

“At the end of the day it makes it so much easier for everyone involved if developers know what to expect, and have a baseline to start with,” said Keith. “It starts the conversation around where we stand about affordability and market rate.”

Jennifer Lampa, an Isalia manager, agreed that for developers, knowing what a neighborhood wants and avoiding a drawn-out approval process are key goals. She said the new guidelines, while not hard-and-fast rules, could serve as a “financially viable, streamlined roadmap” for future developers.

Lampa described the company, which recently relocated from Brookline to Roxbury, as a small, four-year-old firm that places a priority on building good relationships with its neighbors.

“For us, meeting with these groups was an investment,” she said. “We want them to be happy with our work. We’re not here to build and then flip the property.”