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Oregon AFL-CIO HQ to become worker housing

By Don McIntosh
Associate editor

When the Oregon AFL-CIO bought its Portland office from the Machinists union in 2011, the 1967-vintage union hall got a facelift. Now it's about to get a new body.

If all goes as planned, the Oregon Labor Center will meet a wrecking ball in mid-2017 to make way for a four-story development combining union office space with underground parking and up to 120 units of affordable housing. Union pension funds would pay for it, and union workers would build it. And unlike most residential apartments going up in inner Southeast Portland today, these would be priced at rents affordable to working people.

If feasible, the project could even include an indoor-outdoor child care facility and a community meeting space available to neighborhood residents.

Oregon AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain conceived the project, and pitched it to his Executive Board June 17. Emily Johnstone, business development director for the national AFL-CIO's Housing Investment Trust, joined the meeting on



If all goes according to plan, the former Machinists hall will be torn down to make way for affordable apartments for working families.

speaker phone.

"You will be a model for every other labor organization that owns land," Johnstone told the board.

The AFL-CIO Housing Investment Trust is interested in financing the project's estimated \$28 million in development costs, with help from other sources, including a federal Low-Income Housing Tax Credit that the state of Oregon would issue. To oversee construction, the Oregon AFL-CIO would choose an experienced local developer that has worked well with unions in the past.

The Oregon AFL-CIO Executive Board voted unanimously to move forward with the project, and approved funds to develop a site plan, conduct a feasibility study, and create a separate non-profit entity to limit organizational liability.

Chamberlain met June 27 with an architect to begin work on a site plan, and will begin interviewing prospective developers July 8. The plan is to choose a developer by mid-August, apply for tax credits in January, and break ground in June 2017.

Located at 3645 SE 32nd Ave., just south of Powell

Boulevard, the 0.78-acre parcel currently consists of a low-slung 4,300 square foot building and a 20,000 square foot parking lot. But as a four or five-story building, the same parcel could house up to 120 units in a mix of studio, one-, two- and three-bedroom apartments. Four-fifths of the units would be offered at rents affordable to low-income households (those below 60 percent of area median income). The remaining fifth would be affordable to those making up to 80 percent of area median income.

Portland is in the midst of an affordable housing crisis. At a June 16 breakfast organized by the Northwest Oregon Labor Council, Portland Commissioner Dan Saltzman said the city is short 24,000 units of affordable housing, even as an estimated 1,000 people a month are moving to Portland.

"Finding developable land for affordable housing is really hard in Portland right now," Johnstone told the Labor Press. "This is an example of labor giving back to the community by using its real estate to create affordable housing and also creating jobs that can support a family."

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