

School Sisters of St. Francis to Plan to Convert Convent into Senior Apartments

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Special to *The Catholic Herald*

Contingent on zoning approval, the School Sisters of St. Francis plan to convert a portion of the St. Joseph Center, their former south side convent, into senior apartments.

St. Joseph Convent, 1501 S. Layton Blvd., was constructed in 1890 in the Romanesque Revival style using Cream City Brick with yellow brick additions in 1913, 1914, and 1923.

Working with real estate developer General Capital Group LLP, in Fox Point, the sisters plan to seek affordable housing tax credits, as well as state and federal historical preservation tax credits to assist in financing the development of the historical property.

The \$17 million proposal would include 58 senior apartments and 10 family townhouses, said Sr. Catherine Ryan, treasurer of the School Sisters of St. Francis.

“There would also be 46 one-bedroom apartments and 12 two-bedroom apartments,” she said, adding, “For several years, the sisters have been discussing more ways to share St. Joseph Center with the Milwaukee community.”

Additionally, the renovations would include a community gathering space, library, business center and fitness center for residents. The renovated town homes will retain aspects of the building’s historic character and showcase high ceilings and open floor plans.

According to Sr. Ryan the School Sisters of St. Francis serve in 11 countries and need to focus their financial resources to support their ministries, provide education for new members and care for retired members.

“The center building of St. Joseph Center is larger than the sisters need today and we want to share this center building with seniors who need affordable housing,” she said, and added, “The sisters (also) want to share another part of the campus with families who need affordable housing.”

While the project is in its early stages, Michael O’Loughlin, marketing and communications director for the congregation, explained that designs for the senior housing is in its development stage.

“The sisters are in the early phases of planning with architects and developers,” he said. “Designs are being developed and third-party funding is not yet secured.”

Continuing as the center for their sacred space is the St. Joseph Chapel, built in 1917 and constructed in the Romanesque Revival style, explained O’Loughlin, who added it will remain a place of worship and prayer for sisters, other residents and the public.

“Many community groups like Early Music Now and the Bach Chamber Choir also use the chapel, and this will continue,” he said. “In addition, our U.S. Province uses St. Joseph Hall to hold numerous outreach concerts, workshops and presentations. The hall also provides a meeting space for neighbors and friends in Milwaukee.”

The affordable housing tax credits require that at least 85 percent of the units be offered at below-market rents to those earning no more than 60 percent of the local median income. If the project receives the tax credits, the project could begin in fall 2020.

“If we receive approval for tax credits, the project will extend the center building of St. Joseph Center to seniors and families who need affordable housing,” explained Sr. Ryan. “The project is possible only if this funding is obtained.”

This is not the first time the sisters have converted buildings into housing units.

In 2013, the \$18 million Maria Linden Independent Senior and Assisted Living Apartments opened with 72 units on Greenfield Avenue. The adaptable facility allows residents to age in place. Named for a German Shrine to the Blessed Virgin Mary, Maria Linden combined a new four-story building with the northwest wing of the St. Joseph center. Residents include sisters and laity.

“Maria Linden Independent Senior and Assisted Living Apartments provides affordable senior housing on this same campus,” said Sr. Ryan. “Maria Linden is fully occupied and has had a waiting list for potential residents since its opening in 2013.”

Additionally, in 2015, a \$9 million development created 77 apartments for School Sisters members in the former Sacred Heart Sanitarium on Layton Blvd. Those apartments in the Alexia Tower and Clara Court serve retired nuns with nursing care.

This final construction would help the SSSF stabilize the property for the long term, but will require a variance to get it approved.

“St. Joseph Center is zoned for institutional uses,” said Sr. Ryan. “The affordable senior housing and family homes project requires the approval of a use variance by the Zoning Board of Appeals.”

The project will answer the ongoing call for affordable senior living, said Sr. Ryan.

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