

School Sisters of St. Francis plans to convert historic former south side convent into senior apartments

By Tom Daykin, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

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A historic former convent on Milwaukee's south side would be converted into senior housing under a new \$17 million proposal.

The School Sisters of St. Francis, working with Fox Point-based General Capital Group LLP, wants to redevelop portions of the St. Joseph Center, 1501 S. Layton Blvd.

Those apartments would be for older people who can live independently, and would be available for people beyond members of the School Sisters, according to a proposal filed with the Milwaukee Board of Zoning Appeals.

The south wing of the building, historically known as St. Joseph Convent, would have 58 one- and two-bedroom apartments on four floors, according to the plans.

Also, 10 two-story town homes would be created within two other historic buildings: the convent's former powerhouse and the St. Jude building.

General Capital will seek federal affordable housing tax credits, as well as state and federal historic preservation tax credits, to help finance the development, said Sig Strautmanis, a partner in the firm.

The affordable housing tax credits would require at least 85% of the units be provided at below-market rents to people earning no more than 60% of the local median income.

Construction could begin next fall if the project receives tax credits in 2020, Strautmanis said Thursday. The apartments would take about a year to develop.

The St. Joseph Center renovations would include a large community gathering space, library, business center and fitness center for residents of all three buildings.

The renovated town homes would feature high ceilings, open floor plans and other aspects of the buildings' historic nature, the proposal said.

The apartments would maintain strong ties to the St. Joseph Center, including access to the historic St. Joseph Chapel and services offered by the School Sisters.

The order would continue to maintain its offices at St. Joseph Center.

Also, the School Sisters will continue to provide housing for its members at the larger complex, bordered by South Layton Boulevard, South 29th Street, West Greenfield Avenue and West Lapham Street.

Other buildings at that complex have been converted into housing in recent years.

The \$18 million Maria Linden Independent Senior and Assisted Living Apartments, 2735 W. Greenfield Ave., opened in 2013.

The 72-unit Maria Linden, named for a German shrine to the Virgin Mary, blended a new four-story building with the renovated northwest wing of St. Joseph Center. Its residents include sisters and lay people.

Also, a \$9 million project that created 77 apartments for School Sisters members opened in 2015 at the neighboring former Sacred Heart Sanitarium, 1545 S. Layton Blvd.

Those apartments, at the six-floor Alexia Tower and single-floor Clara Court, include nursing care for retired nuns, most of whom served in teaching and other ministries.

The latest proposal would be a final renovation project at the complex that "will allow the School Sisters to stabilize the property for the long term," according to a statement submitted by General Capital.

The project will need Board of Zoning Appeals approval for a use variance.

St. Joseph Convent's first section was built in 1890, according to the Wisconsin Historical Society. It was built in several sections in the Romanesque Revival style, using Cream City brick with yellow brick additions.

St. Joseph Chapel was completed in 1917.