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Yarmouth village's history develops with Main Street projects

BY MAUREEN MILLIKEN

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PHOTO / MAUREEN MILLIKEN

The North Yarmouth Academy buildings at 149 Main St. (right) and 153 Main St. are under contract to Waypoint Partners, which plans to develop them into townhouse condos.

YARMOUTH — Four historic buildings on Main Street are poised for new owners as village development heats up, despite lack of movement on proposed character-based zoning changes.

Three North Yarmouth Academy buildings are under contract with a buyer, and a new owner has also been found for the Grand Trunk railroad depot.

Waypoint Partners is proposing a 12-unit townhouse-style residential project for 153 and 149 Main St., two of three buildings it bought

from North Yarmouth Academy.

The plan calls for eight two or three-bedroom units in the Weld and Shepley buildings, and Waypoint would also construct a third building at the rear of the 1.82-acre property.

The company has developed properties in Falmouth, Cape Elizabeth, Bridgton, Denmark, Naples, Raymond, Southport, Phippsburg and Smithfield.

Waypoint also bought the Colonial house at 162 Main St. Built in 1792, it houses office rental space. The developer plans to keep that building as it is.

Farther west on Main Street, the 112-year-old Grand Trunk depot, which the town has owned since 1965, will have a new owner.

The name won't be made public until details are ironed out, said Sarah Hansen, real estate manager for the Maine Preservation Society, which marketed the building through its Preserve and Sell Program. The building is owned by the Village Improvement Society and was most recently used by a florist.

The buyer was chosen out of 14 proposals after a **March 6 submission deadline**.

Hansen said that Maine Preservation and the Village Improvement Society didn't have a particular use in mind for the building.

"The primary goal of the sale is finding a buyer who will preserve and rehabilitate the building while providing a stable use that contributes to the economic vitality of Main Street," she said.

Waypoint Partners' path to renovating two Main Street buildings is more difficult.

The developer was scheduled to go before the Planning Board Wednesday night seeking a contract zone for the project. The new construction isn't allowed under current zoning, and the town has yet to pass zoning amendments that have been developing over the past few years.

"We decided to proceed with a contract zone request, as the timing for the CD4 town zoning changes did not align with our plans for development," said Matt Wogan, of Waypoint, on Tuesday.

Matthew Cardente of Cardente Real Estate, broker for the North Yarmouth Academy buildings, said the development has been under discussion for a year and all sides expected the new zoning rules to go into effect last fall.

He said on Monday the plan, drawn to conform to those rules, is the best possible use for the two 177-year-old buildings.

Wogan has made an effort to work with the town's vision, Cardente said. "This is the best proposed project I've seen in all my years of real estate [work]," in terms of the developer's preparation before the first meeting with the planning board.

The proposed zoning changes would protect and enhance the historic character of the village, improve connectivity to surrounding neighborhoods, and restore the streetscape, the plan says. It's wide-ranging, addressing issues like safety, accessibility and energy efficiency, as well as aesthetics and historic preservation.

Cardente said the developer also took into account the safety of the 300 students, from kindergarten through 12th grade, who attend the private school.

"You don't want a high-impact user," he said. He said offices generate an average of five cars per 1,000 square feet, but residential projects have a lot less traffic.

During the 2016-17 school year, the school put together a master plan that assessed the 18 buildings on the 25-acre campus and future needs, said Ben Jackson, head of school. With more than 30,000 square feet of space added over the last decade, the 6,230-square-foot Weld building and 8,866-square foot Shepley building were no longer needed, he said.

The Shepley building, at 153 Main St., was originally a dormitory. It has been vacant for several years. Jackson said it was rendered obsolete when Russell Hall, which houses the foreign language department, was renovated and the Mertz Science Center was built in 2008.

The Weld building, at 149 Main St., housed the school's admissions and communications departments, which have been relocated to Dole House.

The school is paying property tax on the buildings, since they aren't being used for school purposes.

According to town tax records, the 2017 town appraisal and assessment on 153 Main St. is \$600,700; 149 Main St. is appraised and assessed at \$1 million.

The school bought the third building it sold, at 162 Main St., in August 2001. The 6,623-square foot building was part of the property used to build the Metz Science Center.

Jackson said the building has never been used by the school, but has always been used as rental property.

Jackson said that North Yarmouth Academy wants the character and architecture of Main Street to be protected and enhanced by development on the property it is selling.

"It is important to the academy that we partner with a buyer who is going to preserve the historic integrity of the property, and we are confident we have identified a great partner in this project," he said. "The current proposal for these properties is consistent with the

development of a charming walking village with a thoughtful balance of residences, shops and restaurants.”

Main Street in Yarmouth is a mix of large houses, most more than a century old, and small commercial and office buildings.

Cardente said that Waypoint came in with a plan that fit. “The intent really was to make sure it matches” the rest of the neighborhood, he said.

Wogan, of Waypoint, said the town is also a good fit for the company and a natural outgrowth of the Portland housing market for people who are looking for a walkable village to live in.

“Yarmouth is the perfect village for this type of development,” he said in an email Tuesday. “The authenticity and history in the village is something that is very tough to create when building a residential community. Village living was vibrant (and a necessity) pre-automobile, and the resurgence of this style living has been on the rise across the country for quite some time -- less is more perhaps? (less car, less yard, less footprint, less impact).”

He cited businesses within walking distance of the buildings — Rosemont Bakery, Handy’s/OTTO Pizza, Gather, Royal River Grill, Owl & Elm pub and Clayton’s deli. “All the bases are pretty well covered,” he said.

Historic preservation is a guarantee at the railroad depot, which is at 288 Main St., given that Maine Preservation will hold a preservation easement on both the interior and exterior.

The goal is to have protected buildings in active use, Maine Preservation Society’s Hansen said.

“We want the property to be a functional, habitable space, so changes are allowed as long as essential historic features are not eliminated,” she said. “Changes can include the addition of bathrooms, kitchens, additions.”

The society reviews plans and will help solve any problems that might come up. “We do not want these buildings to be museum-pieces,” she said. “We know they need to change over time and find that our involvement helps ensure that the key historic elements of these places endure.”

Cardente, a lifelong resident of Yarmouth and a board member at Maine Preservation, said the recent property transactions are exciting. “There are four major buildings on Main Street actively in process of changing ownership,” he said. “They’ve all been there long before any of us were born.”

“[The] buyers are looking to maintain the integrity of the village by proposing consistent uses and making sure renovations fit the area,” he said.