

Fertile Ground Micro Apartments Project - Affordable Green Housing

Presentation to City of Olympia, Land Use & Environment Committee

October 14, 2019

By Chris van Daalen, Board Member

The Commons @ Fertile Ground



The Fertile Ground property at 911 Adams St. purchased by the City in 2018 would be an ideal site for affordable green micro-housing development. For 20+ years, the Commons @ Fertile Ground non-profit organization has held this space as a gift to the community, with a Mission to "demonstrate urban sustainability and resilience at a neighborhood scale". We provide a gathering space, open space, green building education, and an urban oasis of beauty, agriculture and friendship.

The Fertile Ground Micro-Apartments project gives the Olympia City Council an opportunity to honor that history and Mission, and create a **high-profile demonstration project** which reflects the values behind recent Council decisions to declare a housing crisis and a climate emergency.

Single-Room (SRO) Occupancy, otherwise known as congregate housing, also has a history in Olympia, which unfortunately is fading away with the recent sale of the Angelus apartments. Congregate housing was deployed across the country in the middle of the last century in response to homelessness and poverty arising from the 1920s Great Depression. Now we face a similar crisis and affordable green micro-housing is a key part of today's solution.

Architect/Developer and Legacy Member of the NW EcoBuilding Guild, Neiman Taber Architects has demonstrated success designing or developing eleven previous microhousing projects in Seattle/King County, using all available incentives and partnerships to achieve that success. David Neiman has provided valuable information¹ to City Staff which can inform the process and goals of this project. Staff and Council are smart to incorporate this information as you develop a Request for Qualifications and prepare to launch the development process.

Yet Olympia is a different housing market with a rent structure perhaps 1/3 lower than Seattle's. To succeed here, Olympia will need every tool in the toolbox to minimize the time and cost of the project to ensure the permanent affordability of the units. These could/should include:

- Contribution of land and/or frontage improvements
- Multifamily Tax Exemption
- Reduced impact fees
- Expedited permitting
- Public or private grants
- Community Partnerships

¹ See video about The Roost micro-apartments: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n6fWvtvz5NE>; and Neiman Taber Powerpoint re: SRO/Congregate Housing: <https://we.tl/t-RQbi28mSEJ>. David Neiman is speaking on this topic at the NW EcoBuilding Guild Green Building Slam+Summit Oct. 25-26 in Seattle. Register at www.NorthwestGreen.org.

Make it a Model

As you move ahead on this project, the Council should keep in mind what truly holistic solutions look like, and use this project to set the tone and pace for others that will follow. In the last year, the Council declared a climate emergency as well as a housing crisis. The Comprehensive Plan and Downtown Action Strategy include goals such as:

- Consider how green space for food production could be integrated
- Encourage energy efficiency and other 'green building' methods.

Thus, to develop a micro-apartment project which honors the Downtown Strategy as well as the Commons' Mission of urban sustainability, please consider the following recommendations:

- In response to the Climate Emergency, the project should be Net-Zero Energy. A Zero energy building² means zero energy bills for residents, a big factor in affordability.
- The project should maximize open space and urban food production. To replace the existing open space that will be lost with this project, the City should remove & replace 9th ave. between Franklin and Adams with new open space and food growing areas.
- Encourage biophilic design to ensure that beauty and connection to nature are not sacrificed to budgetary considerations. Natural lighting and ventilation, plants, and nature-themed artistic elements are key to this.
- Tie in with the EcoDistrict: envision neighborhood-scale community solar, water reuse for domestic plumbing, and resiliency to serve the project and surrounding neighborhood.
- Require a community focus - public engagement, relationship to neighborhood
- The previous two points can be achieved by partnering with Thurston Housing Land Trust as a to manage the housing once it has been completed.
- Utilize a green building certification such as Built Green³ or Living Building Challenge⁴ to provide a measure of the project's sustainability performance.
- The project should avoid federal / state grants which come with requirements that will make the project expensive; Neiman says "affordable at 50% AMI can be achieved in the Seattle market without subsidy, as long as we avoid triggering expensive requirements."
- Consider making it mixed-use, with ground floor commercial / retail space for a food, art or sustainability business or non-profit

This project represents a unique opportunity for Council to demonstrate what it stands for when it comes to housing, community and climate solutions. Therefore, I request that Council and Staff move quickly to approve and release a Request for Qualifications to engage the development community to make this project a reality. Meanwhile, I will work with the Council and Staff to forge the community partnerships that can help make the project a success. Let's get this project underway in 2020!

² A recent study "Zero Energy Buildings in Massachusetts: Saving Money from the Start" by the US Green Building Council MA, concluded that "The perception that zero energy buildings always cost more upfront is a myth; the reality is that zero energy buildings are a smart investment." See <https://usgbcma.org/zero-energy-buildings/>

³ Recommend Built-Green Emerald-star Certification: <https://www.builtgreen.net/docs/librariesprovider2/checklists/emerald-star-certification.pdf>. OR...

⁴ Recommend Living Building Challenge Petal Certification (<https://living-future.org/lbc/>), Zero Energy (<https://living-future.org/zero-energy/>) or Zero Carbon Certification (<https://living-future.org/zero-carbon-certification/>)