

Boston Business Journal

June 1-7, 2007 Vol. 27, No. 18

74 affordable elderly units planned for Chinatown

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Rogerson Communities is developing a \$26 million project to bring more affordable elderly housing to Chinatown.

The project, which involves the demolition and rehabilitation of historic buildings on four parcels on Essex Street, will result in 74 affordable housing units for the Greater Boston Chinese Golden Age Center/On Luck Housing Development Inc. The Chinatown nonprofit, which has a \$3 million operating budget, owns and operates the fully occupied, 28-unit Hong Lok House. As part of the redevelopment, the house at 25-31 Essex St. will be torn down and replaced by an eight-story building that will include the 74 units as well as an apartment to house a full-time manager and a new senior center on the street level.

“What we’re building is a first-class building with all new systems,” said James F. Seagle Jr., president of Rogerson Communities, which has led a number of successful redevelopment affordable housing projects in the city.

The Hong Lok project (Hong Lok means “happy and healthy house”), which also includes numbers 11-13, 15-17 and 19-21 Essex St., comes at a time when waiting lists for elderly who need affordable housing in the community run as long as seven years while luxury condos stand vacant nearby. Because it’s been increasingly difficult for small and midsize nonprofits to develop real estate on their own, many, like On Luck Housing, have turned to Rogerson Communities, a 147-year-old nonprofit that specializes in real estate development for other nonprofits.

Rogerson stepped in when Ruth Moy, executive director of the Golden Age Center, asked the organization to manage what was a previous plan to build and maintain a 22-unit, four-story building on the site. At the time, the former plan was for Archstone/Liberty Place Developers, which erected a 28-story luxury loft apartment building on nearby Washington Street, to build a 22-unit facility to provide affordable housing



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Ruth Moy, executive director of Greater Boston Chinese Golden Age Center, and James F. Seagle Jr., president Rogerson Communities, aim to bring more affordable elderly housing to Chinatown.

as part of its mitigation agreement with the Boston Redevelopment Authority.

Under that proposal, qualified residents would have been charged at least \$850 in monthly rent, which, while meeting affordable housing standards, was still too high for Hong Lok clients, who pay an average of \$180 a month in rent — the remainder is subsidized by the federal government — and have household incomes of less than \$15,000 a year.

With the backing of Mayor Thomas Menino, Rogerson Communities took over the project little over a year ago. With the new plans, Rogerson is going to maintain the federally subsidized affordable housing plan, enabling residents to continue living in the new Hong Lok House.

Construction will be handled in two 12-month phases, the first to begin next year. The design will focus on elements that serve the disabled and elderly and include other amenities. The 2,500-square-foot elder center will include a gathering place, medical treatment clinic and a room for ballroom dancing.

“Our scheme takes the project to another level,” said Chia-Ming Sze of Chia-Ming Sze Architect Inc. in Boston, the architect for the project. “The more you can get (in units), the more you can spread the costs throughout the project.”

Rogerson is still waiting for approval from the city’s historic commission, since the area is a historic district.

Rogerson’s goal is to raise \$4.2 million from private foundations and individuals. So far it has raised \$2.2 million from entities including the Grand Circle Foundation, the Chinatown Trust Fund and the Charles H. Farnsworth Charitable Trust.

“We’re going to touch up our new neighbors who are able to help us,” said Seagle, referring to Rogerson’s appeal for donations from individuals living at the Ritz-Carlton Residences at Boston Common and other nearby luxury residences.

Turning to Moy, he said, “We know some people, don’t we?”

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