

Housing for low-income seniors advances

BY GEOFFREY GRAYBEAL, The Herald-Sun
April 8, 2004 6:46 pm

CHAPEL HILL -- A few Hillsborough officials took their "first step" Thursday to building a federally financed affordable housing project for low-income senior citizens in northern Orange County.

The initial stride took place at Chapel Hill's Manley Estates, where with each subsequent step project supporters got a glimpse of an existing facility similar to the one envisioned for Hillsborough.

"This is a first step for us," said Jack Chestnut, the county's Advisory Board on Aging chairman, who organized the tour of the 41-unit project on Merritt Mill Road.

Hillsborough Town Board member Mike Gering, Orange Congregations in Mission Executive Director Sharon Freeland and Inter-Faith Council Executive Director Chris Moran were among the officials who met with First Baptist Minister Rev. J.R. Manley, the complex's namesake, and housing consultant Lane Sarver.

OCIM, with assistance from IFC and town and county officials, hopes to apply for housing financed through the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.

The town's desire for such a facility became apparent during months of discussions over two proposed retirement communities, Corbinton Commons and the Village at Meadowview, that were ultimately rejected by the Hillsborough Town Board.

To be eligible for Manley Estates or other similar HUD-financed projects, the residents have to be at least 62 years old, with incomes at 50 percent of the median income or below -- about \$23,000 in Orange County.

"There's such a crying need for [something like] it in northern Orange," Gering said. "Everybody recognizes it."

As they strolled through Manley Estate's apartment homes, sat on porches and stared at the walking trail, gazebo and library, Hillsborough officials were impressed by the possibilities of landing such a project for their town.

"This is wonderful isn't it? Boy, we would be just so excited to have this," Freeland said, before later adding, "We're committed to seeing this thing through."

Gering said he was excited about the endeavor and that the town would be supportive.

"To imagine something like this for Hillsborough is enthralling," he said.

Sarver stressed that competition for the federal dollars is tough, with only about three to four projects approved throughout the state each year.

HUD officials use a ranking formula to determine priority based on factors such as community involvement, experience, local government involvement and need.

"Our concern as an agency is getting more [affordable] housing units in the county, particularly in the northern part," Moran said.

Since the Carrboro-based IFC is an existing recipient recognized by HUD it has agreed to be a co-sponsor of the Hillsborough project.

"We appreciate IFC's initiation into this project," Freeland said. "We do want to hold hands."

Finding land would be the next critical step in the process, Chestnut said, adding that he hopes to put together a site selection committee soon. He said it would be ideal if the senior housing project could be located adjacent to the county's planned northern senior center.

Chestnut noted that the Meadowlands industrial park would make a good site since there are existing services there.

Organizers of the senior housing proposal also hope to solicit support from the County Commissioners.