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Community Seeks Promise of More Affordable Housing

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LOWELL -- Eduardo Monteiro had stood in the cold night air for about a half hour last night before he went to the microphone to tell his story of immigrating to the United States and working 40 hours a week as a janitor for \$1,300 a month, while paying \$750 to rent an apartment. Monteiro spoke to about 100 local clergy and their parishioners who let their fingers and toes feel the chill of the night air during a candlelight prayer service on the lawn of St. Anne's Episcopal Church on Merrimack Street.

Their prayers were for the success of the 10-year initiative to end homelessness that will be kicked off by City Manager Bernie Lynch tonight.

They were also for Lynch to look into his heart and hear their request that affordable housing be included as plans are reviewed for the redevelopment of the area on the edge of downtown around Jackson, Middlesex and Appleton streets.

In particular, the Hamilton Canal District off Jackson Street could become home to nearly 1,000 condominiums as the redevelopment moves forward, and the Merrimack Valley Project, a Lowell-based coalition of churches, labor unions and other agencies, wants at least 20 percent of those units to be affordable.

Monteiro is the type of hard-working Lowellian who would benefit.

So is Jeannette Reynolds, who was born in a house in the JAM Plan area and grew up on Howard Street before her family's home was taken for construction of the Lord Overpass. Members of her family once worked in the mills in that area.

Reynolds now lives off Appleton Street with family, but wonders what the future holds for the affordable apartments in her neighborhood that house many who would likely be homeless if the plan takes their homes.

"My hope is that those who once worked in those mills will be able to afford to rent or buy units there," Reynolds said.

Gail Frace, of Trinity Lutheran Church and an organizer of the event, said there are more than a dozen houses in that area that now provide affordable rooms to Lowellians who fear that otherwise they would be homeless.

She said the initiative to push the city toward adding affordable units to the redevelopment is a win-win situation, because the city could apply to put a Chapter 40R zoning overlay district there, requiring 20 percent affordable housing, but potentially getting the city \$3.6 million in state funds.

"For us, this is the time to work our faith," Frace said.

The MVP has spoken to Lynch and four city councilors so far, according to organizer Joy Cushman. Councilors Rita Mercier, Bud Caulfield and James Milinazzo have voiced support. Councilor George Ramirez does not want any housing in the district, but supports affordable housing if there is more than business there, Cushman said.

Lynch has declined to commit to seeking affordable housing.

He has said that because city money was used to obtain land in the district, he must do what is best for city taxpayers by bringing business and jobs to the area.

Those gathered in the cold last night, though, as the bells of St. Anne's rang 20 times to symbolize the percentage of affordable housing the MVP would like to see, said Lynch should instead do what he knows is right in his heart.

"We know that deep down, somewhere in his heart and mind, that he knows it is the right thing to do," said The Rev. Henrique Wilson, of the International Christian Fellowship Ministries.

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