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Nonprofit takes hold of Pigeon Cove housing

By Stephanie Bergman Staff Writer

ROCKPORT — A Beverly-based nonprofit development group has taken ownership of Pigeon Cove Ledges, a complex that contains 22 percent of Rockport's recognized affordable housing units.

In a deal finalized Dec. 1, Harborlight Community Partners took ownership of the complex from Curtis Street Associates Limited Partnership, a for-profit management company run by Fred and Joe Seppala.

Pigeon Cove Ledges was built as an affordable housing complex in the 1980s, and under the terms of the affordable housing arrangement, after 30 years the complex could revert to market-rate apartments if no nonprofit was willing to take over the complex.

In 2009, notice that the complex was going to revert was sent to area nonprofit groups, and Harborlight responded.

"Somebody had to buy this thing to keep it affordable," said Andrew DeFranza, executive director of Harborlight, which is also looking to acquire Gloucester's Maplewood School building. "We were the only nonprofit suitor."

In order to take ownership, the nonprofit had to secure nearly \$5 million to cover the \$3.7 million cost of buying out the existing owners, plus legal fees, renovation expenses and loan commitments required by the terms of the original deal.

Asked why Harborlight took on a project of this size, DeFranza cited the nonprofit's North Shore roots.

"We're local," DeFranza said. "It matters to us what happens here."

While Pigeon Cove Ledges was the only affordable housing complex in Rockport slated to shift to market rate in the near future, the Community Economic Development Assistance Corp. lists over a thousand properties in Massachusetts that will shortly cease to be affordable housing unless nonprofits step in.

"It's like a tidal wave of projects that are going to disappear without some help," said DeFranza.

Rockport is offering that help to the tune of \$850,000, \$600,000 of which comes from community preservation funds and \$250,000 from the Rockport Housing Partnership. The town has been trying to increase the availability of affordable housing.

"It is very important to many of us in Rockport to maintain, as well as develop, affordable housing in order to keep our senior citizens who are on fixed incomes in the place they love, to make it possible for young people just starting out in their careers to be able to live in the same town as their parents, to maintain the rich diversity of esteemed members of our local society from all walks of life and to offer affordable housing options for those who fall in love with this beautiful coastal village and want to move here," Town Administrator Linda Sanders said in a prepared statement. "Harborlight Community Partners provides a valuable service for which we are truly grateful."

Harborlight says it appreciates the help from the town as well.

"(Rockport) really came to the table big time," said DeFranza. "I was impressed by them."

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