

Norway's Odd Fellows Hall to become affordable housing

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By Nicole Carter

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Mike Hanes of Falmouth has assembled a team to redevelop the Odd Fellows Hall, left, on Main Street in Norway. The iconic Opera House is at right.
Russ Dillingham/Sun Journal

NORWAY — Another dilapidated yet iconic building on Main Street will soon transition from eyesore to centerpiece of the downtown.

Real estate developer Mike Hanes received approval last month from the town's Planning Board to renovate the property into 16 affordable housing apartments and one commercial unit.

It is fitting that Hanes' vision for the Order of Odd Fellows' former headquarters will bring housing options to the area during a time when the rental market is extremely tight and the ability for many to pay rent is shrinking. A golden rule of the Odd Fellows, which originated as a tradesmen fraternity and dates back to 18th-century England, is to teach goodwill and tolerance and to support communal welfare.

Hanes began plotting new life for the Odd Fellows Hall back in 2021.

"It was happenstance to take on this project," Hanes told the Advertiser Democrat in February, within days of gaining Planning Board approval.

"I just happened to be in town with a friend, walking down the street," Hanes said. "I'm sure there are thousands who have walked by that building and some of them have been developers. The unique (confluence) of timing of my seeing it in that fashion and desire to take it on all happened to come together at the right time."

Hanes owns three multi-unit apartment buildings in the Portland area. He has a particular affection for old brick buildings, he said, which is why the Odd Fellows building initially caught his eye. Interest piqued as he began researching ways to rehabilitate 389 Main Street and found architect Jake Keeler, who is knowledgeable about saving historical Norway sites.

Hanes pursued standard commercial funding, but was unable to find a package that worked for him. And despite negotiating over several months with the previous owner, they were unable to come to terms on a price.

Immediate options exhausted, Hanes took a brief break from the project but didn't give up. Last spring, as he renewed his efforts, he learned of a rental development program through Maine State Housing that could provide a solution.

"The program is targeted toward entry-level developers such as myself. It came out the day I started looking for funding sources," Hanes said. "Funds were made available on a first-come, first-served basis. I was fortunate enough, a team including Jake and others, we were able to apply quickly enough to secure a place."

Portland Builders joined Hanes' team as the general contractor. What enticed him about them is the historic renovation of the Mother House in Portland, which had previously served as St. Joseph's Convent and Catherine McCauley High School.

"They redid the chapel and turned the mother house into housing," he said. "They have also transitioned mill buildings into units. They're known for historical renovation conversions to residential properties."

Preservation engineer Al Hodson, who is involved with Norway's Opera House, also joined the team.

To qualify for affordable housing at the Odd Fellows Hall, applicants have to make 80% of Oxford County median income, which is \$40,000-42,000 a year. There are no extra subsidies for assistance programs attached to the apartments. Rent payments are the sole responsibility of tenants.

Hanes has found Norway to be an uncommonly hospitable and supportive community.

"I reached out to (Town Manager) Dennis Lajoie first," Hanes said. "He felt this is definitely needed and was encouraging of the project. The town showed a lot of interest and support upfront for it.

"I knew parking would be an issue. Luckily some community members have stepped up."

Hanes said Matthew Black, who owns property at 15 King St., and Richard McSherry, who owns the old Advertiser Democrat office building on the corner of Main Street and Pike's Hill, offered to attach parking spaces at their lots to the project. Other business interests in town have also welcomed Hanes' housing project.



Mike Hanes, the developer who is transitioning the vacant Odd Fellows Hall into affordable housing, shows where makeshift block supports have been removed from the south side of the building wall and proper repairs will be made. *Nicole Carter / Advertiser Democrat*

Hanes hosted a walk-through of the building for the Planning Board on Feb. 6. He was joined by an enthusiastic group of community members who came to see what Odd Fellows' future will hold. He gave a floor-by-floor presentation on access, basic layout and necessary rehabilitation. Some original features, including interior doors, window sashes and trim, and tin ceilings, will be reutilized.

Hanes explained that although the project is not a historic restoration and will not use historic tax credits that the spirit of the building's history is a priority in its renovation.

"Your attention to historic detail is commendable," said Andrea Burns, a key figure on Norway Downtown and the Opera House board of directors. "That is what has drawn my support."

Hanes later reiterated to the Advertiser Democrat that the local community is one of the project's biggest assets.

He said he has had conversations with Daniel Sipe at Tannery Street and with Matt Delamater from the Opera House board. “We very much want to work together.”

With Planning Board approval, Hanes and his team are moving forward to transition the Odd Fellows Hall into 16 residences on three floors. Two ground-floor apartments will be Americans with Disabilities Act compliant. There will also be one commercial unit at street level. Keeler is working on final architectural blueprints. Hodson is assessing the work necessary to rebuild the rear wall, where the brickwork façade has begun to separate from the structure.

By this fall the financial package with the Maine State Housing Authority will be finalized and Portland Builders will start the construction phase.

“There are so many unknowns with this project,” he said. “You can’t possibly know everything you need. Because of the warm reception (from the community), I can see that as I might run into issues as we go, there is a process that will help me work through them.”

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