

Why an Affluent Suburb Rallied Behind Affordable Housing

A church and an interfaith housing group got Edina, Minnesota, to back a new project for at-risk youth—although a few holdouts remain.

By: Anna Bergren Miller

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Edina, Minnesota (Wendell/Flickr)

Of the Twin Cities' tony western suburbs, Edina is arguably the toniest. Home to professional athletes and Fortune 500 CEOs, the town has a reputation for snobbery; its name is said to be an acronym for, among other things, Every Day I Need Attention.

But not all Edinans satisfy the stereotype. The town's homeless population includes a number of young adults, teenagers and men and women in their early twenties, who left home to escape dysfunction, abuse, or substance-addicted guardians.

"People are often surprised that there's homelessness in the suburbs, particularly in Edina," says Lauren Morse-Wendt, mission and ministry director at Edina Community Lutheran Church (ECLC). "But youth are struggling here; they just don't want anyone to know it."

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In partnership with Beacon Interfaith Housing Collaborative, a nonprofit homeless services provider and advocacy group based in St. Paul, ECLC plans to build a 39-unit supportive housing project across from Edina's Southdale Mall (a regional transportation hub and, like the nearby hospital, a ready source of entry-level jobs). Beacon negotiated a purchase agreement for the site several weeks ago, and has tapped the architecture firm Urban Works to renovate and expand an existing TCF bank building to accommodate studio apartments, communal facilities, and offices for support staff.

The project, which ECLC initiated, is modeled after Nicollet Square, a 42-unit apartment building for homeless youth in downtown Minneapolis. Like at Nicollet Square, residents of the Edina community, called 66 West, will sign leases and pay rent, and are encouraged to move on to independent housing after one to two years.



A rendering of 66 West (Beacon Interfaith Housing Collaborative)

"It's designed to support people as they begin to live independently," says Lee

Blons, Beacon's executive director. "They'll buy their own groceries and cook their own meals. But then the staff is there in terms of guidance, helping them learn to navigate the world."

Founded about 15 years ago by Plymouth Church in Minneapolis, Beacon now represents 70 congregations committed to ending homelessness in the Twin Cities. The organization operates 16 apartment buildings with a total of approximately 500 units.

ECLC contacted Beacon after dedicating a portion of funds from the church's building campaign to the issue of youth homelessness. "ECLC toured Nicollet Square, thinking they might do a toiletry drive," recalls Blons. "They came away and said, 'Yeah, let's build an apartment building.' They're a committed, dedicated church, but they're not that large, so it was a huge undertaking on their part."

Because it is located in a section of town designated for medical offices, 66 West required both rezoning and an amendment to the comprehensive plan to move forward. Edina City Council unanimously agreed to both at a September meeting—a major victory for 66 West's supporters.

"It hasn't been easy to get affordable housing approved there," says Blons, who notes that Edina has approved only 11 new units of affordable housing since 1996, despite a goal (set by the town and the Metropolitan Council) of adding 212 affordable housing units between 2011 and 2020.



Lauren Morse-Wendt (Emily Ann Garcia)

The city council decision follows extensive community mobilization by ECLC. Morse-Wendt, who says she now spends approximately one-quarter of her work hours on 66 West, helped organize hundreds of community presentations—to neighboring congregations, city staff, the Rotary Club, and other groups—with guidance from Beacon's congregational partnership organizers.

"By the time we found the perfect site and took the proposal to rezoning, we had hundreds across the city who were rooting for us," Morse-Wendt says. "They were ready to show up and write postcards." Planning commission hearings often attract more project opponents than supporters, but at the September meeting, fans of 66 West estimate they outnumbered detractors by ten to one.



Supporters of the project, dressed in green, at the planning hearing (Beacon Interfaith Housing Collaborative)

"That represents about two years of work," Blons says. "It doesn't just magically happen."

A vocal group of Edinans continues to oppose 66 West. Calling themselves "Citizens to Preserve the Edina Regional Medical District," a group of undisclosed parties filed a lawsuit against the city council on October 8, alleging procedural errors in allowing the change to the comprehensive plan, and arguing that the affordable housing complex will cause nearby businesses to "suffer irreparable

harm." The city has asked that the suit be dismissed, and both Blons and ECLC's pastor, Rev. Erik Strand, chalk the protest up to some combination of NIMBYism and misguided fear.

"The pushback is really from a small group of folks," says Strand. "They don't understand. Or they want [more affordable housing], but they want it somewhere else."

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The development is still a long way from completion. "It's huge that [the city council approved the project], but it doesn't mean it opens up in a year," says Blons. In the months to come, ECLC will meet with potential private donors (the congregation has itself committed \$80,000 of the estimated \$9 million required), apply for local and state grants, and travel to the state capital to advocate for more state funding for homeless youth.



Lee Blons (Beacon Interfaith Housing Collaborative)

As for the lawsuit, neither Beacon nor ECLC sees much cause for concern. "We've been through it before," says Blons, recalling an unsuccessful suit against Lydia Apartments, Beacon's first project. "It hasn't stopped us or the City of

Edina." Morse-Wendt agrees. "When I've talked to people [who oppose 66 West], I say, 'In three years you'll be our biggest supporter.'"

About the Author



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