GLBT affordable housing project would be first in suburban setting

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A blighted parcel in Bay Shore is part of a block being eyed for the tri-state's first affordable housing for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender seniors, officials and advocates announced yesterday.

The Long Island GLBT Services Network is negotiating to acquire the lot south of its building, which is at 34 Park Ave., and officials expect to begin construction next year on what would be a .75-acre campus, said David Klimnick, the group's chief executive.

The group is also seeking to buy a second neighboring building and expand even more.

Plans include razing the center's 4,200-square-foot building and the adjacent vacant structure at 32 Park Ave. to make way for a 6,000-square-foot GLBT community center and 50 apartments, a mix of studios, one- and two-bedroom units, said Klimnick.

“A lot of people ask, ‘If we have marriage equality, why do we need LGBT senior housing?’” Klimnick said at a news conference outside the center. “I think it’s important to point out that marriage equality does not equate to safety for the GLBT community.”

Site plans are being developed, and affordable housing guidelines from the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development would be used to determine rental rates and eligibility for prospective renters, who may also be straight, Klimnick said.

The county legislature on Nov. 18 is expected to consider legislation to begin the planning process and possibly include financial assistance, County Executive Steve Bellone announced yesterday at the news conference.

Zoning decisions will fall to the Town of Islip, where spokeswoman Patricia Kaloski said no application has yet been filed.

Klimnick said the project will benefit LGBT seniors who grew up in the baby boom era and “faced a lifetime of discrimination.”

In a recent survey by the Washington, D.C.-based Equal Rights Center, gay couples reported being discriminated against when seeking housing in 46 percent of cases.

William Henning, 58, of Bay Shore said growing up gay was “difficult,” and discrimination forced him to hide his sexual identity. “I want to be as open and as gay as I’ve ever been,” Henning said at the news conference. “I don’t want to go back in the closet. I’m gay, and I want to live my life as a proud senior in a stress-less and a friendly GLBT” place.

If the project receives required approvals, the first tenants of the complex — which officials say would be the fifth of its kind nationwide — are expected to get keys and move in by the summer of 2016.

The Bay Shore project would be the first to be placed in a suburban setting — similar developments are in Hollywood, Philadelphia, Chicago and Minneapolis — where the needs for “safe” places for GLBT community members are just as high, Klimnick said.

Klimnick launched the Long Island GLBT Services Network at age 25 in his Levittown apartment. When he tried to expand and find office space, the Queens native said he was repeatedly denied a lease.

A landlord on Main Street — a block from the proposed housing site — agreed to rent a second-floor walk-up in 1995. The group moved to the Park Avenue address 11 years ago and now has locations in Woodbury, Sag Harbor and Patchogue.

About 1,000 GLBT people use the Bay Shore community center each month, Klimnick said. “I just want to pinch myself,” he said. “There’s a lot of hard work to do from here, but I can’t believe we’re here. It’s just incredible.”