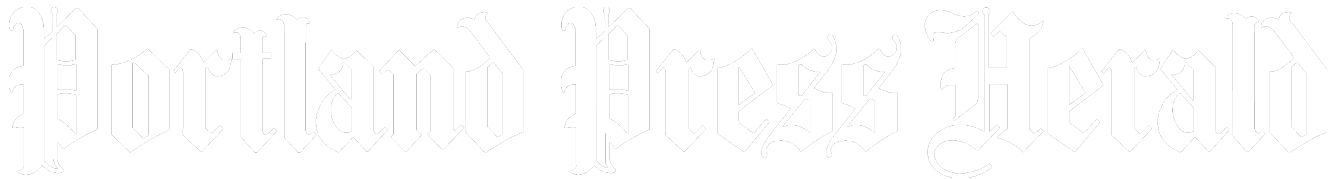


Voter-approved money that LePage blocked is finally going to new housing for seniors

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By Joe Lawlor Staff Writer

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Funds for badly needed senior housing that Maine voters overwhelmingly approved in 2015 were finally awarded Monday after having been blocked by former Gov. Paul LePage.

The \$14.5 million awarded by MaineHousing will help build seven projects across the state that will add 212 affordable housing units for people 55 and older.

Senior housing

These are the new senior housing initiatives that received a total of \$14.5 million from a state bond. *

- The Uplands, Scarborough: 39 units, \$7.05 million
- Bessey School II, Scarborough: 40 units, \$9.6 million
- Hartland Senior Living, Hartland: 30 units, \$6.1 million
- Ellsworth Senior Housing, Ellsworth, 29 units, \$5.8 million
- Belfast Senior Housing, Belfast, 25 units, \$5.6 million
- Belfast Acres Estates, Belfast, 24 units, \$5.6 million
- Willow Springs, Farmington, 25 units, \$6 million

**Source:MaineHousing. Dollar amounts represent state bonds, loans, subsidies, federal, municipal and private funding.*

The awards, combined with other funding, will generate \$45.8 million to build housing developments in Scarborough, Hartland, Ellsworth, Belfast and Farmington. The total funding is a mix of loans, subsidies, federal and municipal funds, and private funding.

“These awards are another welcome step forward for older Mainers,” Gov. Janet Mills said in a statement. “The construction of these new homes, along with the repair and weatherization of existing homes, will ensure that more Maine seniors can live safely, comfortably, and with dignity as they age. I am proud to have signed these long-overdue, voter-approved bonds and look forward to the communities they help create.”

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Cullen Ryan, executive director of Community Housing of Maine, a nonprofit that did not apply for the funding, said releasing the money will provide a much-needed boost to the affordable housing supply. More than 9,000 low-income seniors are on waiting lists for affordable housing, AARP of Maine said.

“This absolutely will make a dent, but we need to do so much more,” Ryan said.

Voters approved the \$14.5 million bond 69 percent to 31 percent in 2015, but LePage held up the release of the money, arguing that it would benefit a select group of developers. LePage vetoed an attempt in the Legislature in 2017 that would have compelled him to release the funding. The veto was upheld by Republicans in the House.

Mills released the bond in January, shortly after she took office, but it took a year to award the funds.

The money was granted to Developers Collaborative for projects in Scarborough, Ellsworth and Belfast; Housing Initiatives of New England for a separate development in Scarborough; Kennebec Valley Community Action Program for a project in Hartland; Avesta Housing for a Farmington development; and Realty Resources for a second project in Belfast.

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“Older Mainers need quality, accessible homes they can afford,” Daniel Brennan, director of MaineHousing, said in a statement. “The need is substantial. We’re hitting the ground running in the new year and are looking forward to putting these funds to work.”

Efforts are underway in the Legislature to increase the housing supply. A bill by state Rep. Ryan Fecteau, D-Biddeford, would create an eight-year, \$10 million per year state-run program of tax credits for affordable housing that would be run by MaineHousing.

The bill, which will be considered by lawmakers this session, would create about 1,000 additional affordable housing units in the state, not age restricted. The program also would have the potential to capture more federal affordable housing dollars.

Lindsay Crete, a Mills spokeswoman, said in a statement that “the governor is reviewing (Fecteau’s) bill and applauds Assistant Majority Leader Fecteau for his leadership on addressing the lack of affordable housing in Maine.”

Ryan, of Community Housing of Maine, said Fecteau’s bill would make a substantial difference in the availability of affordable housing.

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“It would create a systemic change to the supply,” Ryan said.

However, the bill still only addresses part of the shortage, as MaineHousing has estimated that the state needs about 20,000 additional units of affordable housing. In December, the agency awarded \$6.8 million in financial incentives for five affordable housing projects in Portland, South Portland, Waterville and Bangor. Combined, those incentives would preserve or create 275 affordable housing units, MaineHousing said.

Housing affordability is a persistent problem, especially in southern Maine. For instance, a report by the city of Portland shows that the average price of a home there is \$316,000, while the median income is only \$51,799, about half of the income typically needed to afford a \$316,000 home.

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