



All great accomplishments begin with an idea...a vision...and Patuxent Commons is no exception.

Below is a brief history of a 12-year journey undertaken by Autism parents in our community concerned about the future of their children when they are no longer around to care for them. Those children are now adults in their 20s, 30s and 40s. This project has engaged literally hundreds of self-advocates, government agencies, funders, builders, architects, designers, housing experts, and community members on its way to finally putting a shovel in the ground.

To all of you who wrote letters and emails, testified, attended meetings, shared expertise and suggestions, advocated, donated \$1 or \$1 million dollars, this is your project, too. And we would not have gotten here without you. Thank you.

The History of Patuxent Commons

As early as 2012, concerns about *Who will care for my child when I am no longer able to?* came up consistently during the Autism Society's Transition & Adult Issues Support Group meetings. A subgroup of interested parents was established and began regularly meeting to discuss concerns specifically around housing.

Shortly thereafter, in 2014, the Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council awarded a grant to the Autism Society to *Create Housing Opportunities for Individuals with Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*. Our Housing Committee work included reviewing 16 housing models and surveying individuals with disabilities to understand their housing preferences. The subgroup also researched the Howard County Moderate Income Housing Unit Program.

In 2016 we engaged Mark Dunham as a consultant for his expertise with the Generations of Hope Model, which was selected for further review, research and finally development. Mark's expertise with that model and overall insights into housing development was essential in moving our project forward. With Mark's support, the Housing Committee hosted a Discovery Workshop attended by key stakeholders and partners interested in affordable housing options for people with disabilities. The committee also conducted a Feasibility Study in 2016.

Early in our initiative, the Autism Society garnered support from the Community Foundation of Howard County and was featured at its Annual Dinner. The project was also a finalist at the 2017 Change Maker Challenge. Housing Committee members gave presentations about the initiative to many groups, including one at the Autism Society of America's National Conference.

In 2017, the Autism Society formed a Housing Task Force to drive progress and engage a developer to develop housing based on an inclusive, affordable housing concept. The Task Force engaged experts in aging, disabilities (Autism and other disabilities) housing, finance, and elder care, and related topics. The group monitored other disability housing initiatives in Maryland and issued the Patuxent Commons Prospectus and website at end of 2018.

It is important to note, the Autism Society's Board understood that one housing project would not fix the critical need for affordable housing for individuals with disabilities in Howard County, but rather was interested in starting the conversation and inviting others to propose additional solutions and models beyond the traditional ones. To that end, the Autism Society became immersed in state and local requirements for affordable housing developments and enhanced its advocacy efforts in this space. Members regularly testified and met with representatives to educate them on the obstacles the disability community experienced in securing affordable housing. In 2018, an Envision Grant from Catonsville Presbyterian Church provided funding to undertake a market feasibility study. The study was included in a prospectus that was the basis for a Request for Qualifications (RFQ) that the Task Force issued for prospective housing developers. The prospectus called for a project with the following objectives:

1. Address housing instability faced by low-income adults with disabilities, and moderate-income older adults.
2. Enhance social connectedness through building of relationships and community engagement, and reciprocal sharing of social support by neighbors.
3. Use housing as a springboard to maximize individual potential and facilitate community integration for people of all ages, abilities, and incomes.
4. Pioneer a viable, innovative solution to the growing housing crisis facing adults with disabilities that can be adapted elsewhere in Maryland and serve as a model for similar housing developments throughout the United States. The Autism Society is not in the Housing business but rather the serving the disability community business.

In early 2019, the Task Force selected Mission First Housing Development Corporation, , as a development partner. The Autism Society continued its advocacy efforts with testimony and letters of support the provisions of the County's new Adequate Public Facilities Ordinance (APFO) on other affordable housing projects which would allow these initiatives to proceed with development.

In early 2020, Mission First selected a site at the corner of Freetown Road and Cedar Lane in Columbia, MD, an outpost adjacent to the Hickory Ridge Village Center, and entered into a purchase agreement with the Mangione Family. The site meets all the criteria outlined in our concept including access to public transportation, shopping, and employment opportunities within walking distance. With a site secured, Mission First began its work to identify financing for the complex project proposed by the Autism Society. The mix of low income, moderate income and market rate units and other factors posed many challenges for the financing of the deal. Ultimately, the project was financed with a mix of local, state and federal funding and private philanthropy.

Again, there were numerous opportunities for the Autism Society to advocate not only for Patuxent Commons but also affordable housing for people with disabilities. This included countless meetings with state and local elected officials to educate them on our community. In March of 2022 supporters of Patuxent Commons testified and the Baltimore Sun and WBAL TV ran stories on Patuxent Commons which led to the Howard County Council unanimously approving legislation critical for the advancement of our project.

In the summer of 2023 Mission First hosted two Design Workshops attended by community members from a cross-section of potential Patuxent Commons residents: people with disabilities, seniors, and families. County and State officials also attended, including Howard County Executive Calvin Ball and Maryland Secretary of Disabilities Carol Beatty. The sessions were focused on engaging input on the design and programming of three key components/spaces: (1) individual apartments, (2) common indoor amenity spaces, and (3) outdoor spaces which will all be considered by Mission First as the project progresses. Mission First closed on the project financing July 17, 2024 and a groundbreaking ceremony is scheduled for October 1, 2024. The general contractor, Harkins Builders, estimates construction will continue for 17 months.

The Autism Society will now help Mission First fundraise for various items that are either not in project budget or would benefit from additional funding and begin assembling programming plan for project, which will address staffing, and other envisioned community elements/activities that will support resident well-being and social connections. Stay tuned for more details and opportunities to be involved!